Fascism, Liberalism and Europeanism in the Political Thought of Bertrand de Jouvenel and Alfred Fabre-Luce

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Conclusion

From the Sohlberg to Mont Pèlerin

To a large extent, this has been an exercise in political swear words. Fascism is today almost universally seen as one, even by most political parties historically inspired by the phenomenon or belonging to the same tradition.1 With the exception of a few generally marginal extremist groups and equally marginal intellectuals, nobody calls him/herself a fascist.2 More or less the same is true for neoliberalism. Although considered a less absolute evil than fascism, little positive meaning is intended when the spectre of neoliberalism is conjured up in a present-day political context. This is partially the result of how the neoliberal milieu itself developed during the second half of the twentieth century. While the term was used as a positive epithet by neoliberals during the two decades following its invention in 1938, this began to change during the late 1950s alongside the rising dominance inside the Mont Pèlerin Society of a Chicago-School radical anti-statism that looked remarkably like classical liberalism. During the same period, the MPS lost the support of its founding members Raymond Aron, Polanyi and Jouvenel, who grew bored with its laissez-faire dogmatism and highly technical discussions and therefore stopped attending its meetings. In 1960, in a letter to Milton Friedman, Jouvenel admitted feeling ‘out of harmony with the Society’, which he saw turning ever more strongly to ‘a Manicheism according to which the State can do no good and private enterprise can do no wrong’.3

With neoliberalism falling into disuse as a self-descriptive tool of analysis, it was abandoned into the hands of its opponents, who have vocally denounced its influence, especially since the onset of neoliberal policy during and after the Reagan-Thatcher era. This development has led to the confusing situation that ‘neoliberalism’, a concept originally launched to develop a new liberalism acknowledging the importance of the state, is today often seen to stand for the most radically anti-statist

1 For an early analysis of fascism as a near-universal swear word, see George Orwell, ‘As I please: 17’ [1944], in Fascism, vol. 1, eds. Griffin & Feldman, 51.
2 For a rare example of a self-proclaimed ‘fascist intellectual’ engaged in a discussion with historians of fascism (the twentieth-century historian’s version of a paleontologist interviewing a T-Rex), see the discussions with and about the Russian ‘Eurasian’ right-extremist Alexander Dugin in Erwägen, Wissen, Ethik 3 (2004).
3 Cited in Burgin, The Great Persuasion, 150, 175.
free-market fundamentalism. Though much less universally despised than fascism and neoliberalism, Europeanism (and especially its evil twin brother ‘Europhilia’) is also rapidly becoming a swear word in present-day politics. While it is still in use as a positive or neutral term, politicians have become increasingly reluctant to revindicate it, fearing the backlash of an electorate that has in many countries turned against the current state of European integration. From a present-day perspective, the principle use of the three main concepts treated in this study is the negative description of an other. This brings us close to a Sartrian paraphrase: the fascist/neoliberal/Europeanist, c’est les autres.

This has not been my approach. Rather than preliminarily according a present-day meaning to the concepts or engaging in the conflicts of definition and categorisation that have already exerted too large an influence on the historiography of fascism in France, I have analysed what meaning the concepts of fascism, Europe and (neo-)liberalism had for the intellectuals themselves during the period with which I am concerned. My main argument has been that Europeanist and internationalist ideas and context are key to understanding the development of Bertrand de Jouvenel and Alfred Fabre-Luce’s political thought between 1930 and the early 1950s. The commitment of these two intellectuals to a future united Europe, with a reconciled France and Germany at its core, originated in the 1920s. This was not only the driving force behind their ‘fascist drift’ during the first half of the 1930s, it also strongly influenced their attitude during the occupation and permitted them to forge new contacts once the war was over. By the mid-1950s, both Jouvenel and Fabre-Luce were able to look back on the first half of their political and intellectual life and draw positive conclusions. After the horrors of the Second World War, the violent death of several of their closest friends (Drieu, Luchaire) by execution or suicide, and the near-complete collapse of the fascist ideology with which they had long identified, they witnessed the onset of a ‘European revolution’, which they identified as the fulfilment of their decades-old ambitions.

During the 1930s, Jouvenel and Fabre-Luce’s internationalism evolved from a Briandist collective security model with ambitions for a larger United States of Europe into an alliance of authoritarian imperial states that would jointly and rationally exploit the wealth of their colonies and weaker neighbours. Their revulsion against war and the influence of their German contacts steered them towards an intransigent pacifism of the

right, willing to subject all other interests to Franco-German rapprochement. During the same period, their economic ideas shifted from a belief in a liberal economy with limited state guidance to a fascist-corporatist model. Growing frustration with the lack of reforms, chronic governmental instability and the slow procedures of parliament, together with the shock of the Great Depression, ended up shattering Jouvenel and Fabre-Luce's confidence in parliamentarism and capitalism. Hostile towards the left and associating all socialist reform projects with 'totalitarian' Soviet communism, they came to see dictatorship, corporatism and rapprochement with Hitler's Germany as the only solution for France.

Fabre-Luce's fascist ideal type was a revolution without bloodshed, a fascist economy with islands of private initiative and a society of disciplined freedom. Jouvenel's was the realisation of socialism without class struggle, a revolution without a proletariat and with continued privileges for a natural elite. They sometimes presented fascism as a mere method to discipline democracy and immunise it against the threat of communism, but they generally interpreted it as a revolutionarily different system. Both intellectuals associated fascism with the youth, dynamism, adventure and 'physical virtues' of a younger generation, with which they had identified since the late 1920s. This new fascist youth was considered different in their very essence from the ossified legalism and parliamentarism of outdated bourgeois society. Fabre-Luce and Jouvenel attributed the foreign-policy successes of the fascist regimes to Hitler and Mussolini's association with this new generation, while France, still under the reign of a tired and mediocre bourgeoisie, suffered one setback after another. From the founding of the PPF, Jacques Doriot reflected their hope of a strong and dynamic leader forging a fascist party with a more credible popular base than the 'reactionary' anti-parliamentary leagues. Their activities as intellectuals at the party's service permitted them to reach an unprecedented audience while bringing them into contact with different classes of society.

The Fall of France, the occupation and Vichy's National Revolution fundamentally changed the circumstances under which the two intellectuals worked but not their convictions. Both were fascinated with the grand opportunities offered by a Europe united by German arms, and they explained the German victory of 1940 as the result of larger historical, psychological and political developments in Western civilisation, giving National Socialism the credentials of a revolution equal or superior to the French Revolution of 1789. They linked the Nazi victory to a more general fascist revolution which, they hoped, would engulf all of Europe. Fabre-Luce fully embraced the idea of collaboration in the name of this new fascist
Europe, convinced that France would be able to make a worthwhile and even necessary contribution to the system. He criticised the narrow-minded nationalism of those who, out of French patriotic sentiment, refused to take the same direction. Jouvenel was more reluctant, sharing Fabre-Luce's fascinations but unwilling to commit himself entirely to a German Europe. Many ambiguities remained in his behaviour, however, and he seemed to alternate between his connections in the Paris collaborationist world, where several of his closest friends held key positions, his espionage activities on behalf of the Vichy regime and the Resistance network with which he established contacts in his native Corrèze.

After mid-1943, their joint experiences with exile and persecution led to a partial rethinking of their earlier engagements. While both intellectuals rejected the post-war order as a return to the parliamentarianism they held responsible for France's decadence under the Third Republic, they sought for a new creed that would preserve what they understood to be the 'positive' legacy of fascism, essentially consisting of unity, authority, an austere working spirit and respect for a 'natural' hierarchy without the pitfalls of aggressive warfare. They temporarily supported the monarchist movement around the Comte de Paris, after which they found a political home in the post-war press initiatives of the French extreme right. While Jouvenel developed a broader network during his exile in Switzerland and generally tried to avoid political provocation, Fabre-Luce chose the opposite strategy, openly defending the heritage of Pétain and Vichy (though not of collaboration) and attacking the post-war authorities. This brought him lasting notoriety and an almost unmatched prominence among French extreme-rightists, who considered him their prime spokesperson. Jouvenel and Fabre-Luce were hostile to parliamentarianism and to the personality cult of Gaullism, while at the same time fearing the permanent risk of a communist take-over from within or without. As an alternative, they supported an authoritarian kind of Europeanism based on Franco-German cooperation, with joint exploitation of France's North African colonial empire. At the same time, Fabre-Luce was also in touch with the extremist hard core of post-war Eurofascism.

During the same early post-war years, Jouvenel gained international prominence as a neoliberal intellectual and founding member of the Mont Pèlerin Society, partly due to the success of his magnum opus Du Pouvoir. Advocating a pessimistic, Spenglerian, elitist variant of liberalism that was far removed from democratic parliamentarianism, he established strong links with Hayek, Friedman, Röpke and American Cold War conservatives. His correspondence with Röpke reveals how both neoliberal intellectuals
saw their activities as an ‘open conspiracy’ aimed at devising a system of rule by a tiny enlightened liberal elite over the essentially irrational masses who, manipulable and ever tending towards totalitarianism, could not be trusted politically. For Röpke, Jouvenel and Fabre-Luce, the concept of totalitarianism not only served to associate Soviet communism with Nazism as two equally dangerous enemies of the free world but also to associate Nazism with democracy, stressing the plebiscitary tendencies of Hitler’s system of rule and the frightening efficacy of mass propaganda. They stated that any democracy, unless restrained by a strong aristocracy and a tradition of natural law, permanently carried the risk of totalitarianism within itself, since a single party could at any time hijack the system and destroy it from within.

This analysis raises several big questions. Without pretending to be able to answer them systematically, I am nonetheless convinced they need to be addressed, if only to avoid misunderstanding. What is the relationship between fascism and Europeanism? Rather than following Milza’s disbelief that adherents of an ‘ultranationalist’ creed could ever be genuinely interested in internationalism and a European ideal, I am convinced that the relationship was more complex. On the one hand, despite the present-day character of the EU (and the present-day extreme right’s predominantly anti-European stance), Europe never was nor is an exclusively liberal-technocratic concept unrelated to questions of identity, nationalism and imperialism. On the contrary: its strong connection to these concepts was exactly what made the ideal of a United Europe attractive to many right-extremists, who were among the earliest supporters of post-war European integration. During the interwar period, Europe was an ideal projection screen for the ambitions of intellectuals in favour of revolutionary reforms, especially those unrelated to the Marxist parties and inspired by fascist visions of large-scale planning. Jouvenel and Fabre-Luce are not the only cases of intellectuals who drifted to fascism because of their Europeanist ideas. During the war, and especially in Western Europe, Nazi propaganda was able to mobilise these Europeanist visions at the service of its own imperialism. Mark Mazower has argued that it was Hitler’s complete unwillingness to envision building a European empire for anybody else than ‘pure-blooded’ Germans that led to the failure of these propaganda initiatives, not a lack of receptivity among the conquered populations.5

On the other hand, the opposite was also true. Because ‘Europe’ was an alternative for the national framework, it was highly attractive to those who faced exclusion and persecution within their own countries. Considering

5 Mazower, Hitler’s Empire, 447. 559. 590.
themselves ‘victims’ of their own country’s nationalist passions, many former collaborators and Pétainists expected protection from international law and the European Court of Human Rights. Jouvenel pleaded for a ‘European tribunal’ as a bulwark against the totalitarian tendencies of post-war ‘national socialist’ representative governments. For French extreme-rightists, European integration also offered a ‘realistic’ alternative to De Gaulle’s politics of national grandeur. From a post-war geopolitical point of view, since France, Germany and the UK could no longer claim Great Power status on an equal footing with the United States and the Soviet Union, European integration was a necessity. In the context of the Cold War and decolonisation, a Western European union was the only possibility for these nations to keep playing the role of imperialist states with their colonial dependencies, fend off the military danger of communism and maintain Europe as a focal point for culture, science and civilisation.

The relationship between fascism and neoliberalism is an equally thorny issue. While I do not feel qualified to answer this question at a general level, I have stressed both the differences and the striking similarities between Jouvenel’s specific kind of neoliberalism and his earlier fascist ideas. Jouvenel abandoned his fascist enthusiasm for the state as the possessor and sole ‘organising authority’ of all public and private national resources, and the post-war bearded neoliberal academician was obviously far removed from the 1934 rebellious youth calling for an anti-Marxist and anti-capitalist revolution, but this is not all that can be said. In his neoliberalism, Jouvenel retained both his admiration for the strength and courage of a ‘virile’ aristocracy, deserving of its freedom and its right to rule, and his contempt for the stupidity of the masses and the weak and ‘decadent’ system of parliamentarianism. More generally, despite differences that are both obvious and essential, neoliberalism and fascism do share a few characteristics: a Darwinist vision of society as a fierce struggle between competing groups and individuals in which the best manage to prevail; a positive appreciation of societal inequality, considered not as an unfortunate and morally unjust by-product of the system but as a key requirement to its functioning; and a meritocratic elitism that presumes that those destined to rule deserve the privileges, rewards and honours associated with their position. Based on these characteristics, it is less surprising that two exiles – the outspoken anti-Nazi German economist Wilhelm Röpke and Jouvenel, a former prominent member of the prime fascist party in 1930s France – discovered their profound agreement on so many issues.

How important were Fabre-Luce and Jouvenel for the post-war reconfiguration of the French extreme right? It is clear that they were well-suited to
contribute to this ideological innovation, based on their pre-war status as Europeanist fascist intellectuals with ample international contacts and a background in progressive republicanism rather than the extreme right's traditional hotbed of Maurrassian Catholic conservatism. It is hard to measure the exact extent of their contribution, however. Both their Europeanism and their ‘realism’ dated from the late 1920s, and it is true that these two elements came to replace the traditional Maurrassian dogmas of aggressive nationalism and contempt for republican legality that had exerted such an important influence on the French extreme right. Their replacement by a concern with the republican rule of law, a suspicious attitude towards national delusions of grandeur and a pro-European orientation could have been taken directly from the writings of Jouvenel and Fabre-Luce. Considering especially Fabre-Luce’s prominence in extreme-rightist circles during these years, it seems probable that he made an important contribution to the ideological renewal of the French extreme right, while Jouvenel’s newly found identity as a more systematic and academic intellectual enabled his thought to play a more indirect role.

Another difficult question is how this post-war ideological renewal relates to fascism. This question is linked to the controversial topic of fascism outside its classical temporal boundaries of interwar and wartime Europe. Can political formations that drift away from what are often considered key elements of fascist ideology, during a period marked by a context fundamentally different from that of interwar Europe, still be meaningfully analysed in relation to it? Formulated more concretely: if the extreme right drops its aggressive nationalism and its opposition to the republic, what does it still have to do with fascism? While I consider this very much an open question, I have clung to the concept of fascism in my post-war analysis. Since I have studied the years immediately following the end of the Second World War, during which fascism was permanently evoked and interpreted by Fabre-Luce and Jouvenel, who both kept positioning themselves towards it and attempting to distil its ‘positive’ elements, I argue that fascism remains a valuable topic of analysis, regardless of the exact behaviour of the movements it has inspired.

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As the crow flies, the Sohlberg and Mont Pèlerin are less than 300 kilometres apart. Both are low mountains situated in a country neighbouring France, in a beautiful natural environment. When the weather is clear, they offer breathtaking views of eastern France. With an altitude around or just below
1,000 metres, the two mountains are easily eclipsed by higher reliefs in their surroundings, which would have assured them a relatively anonymous existence had it not been for Otto Abetz and Friedrich Hayek. Although neither Jouvenel nor Fabre-Luce camped on the Sohlberg during the original Franco-German youth meeting in 1930, and only Jouvenel was present on Mont Pèlerin seventeen years later, the two mountains symbolise key elements in the two intellectuals' political trajectory. The Sohlberg meeting resulted in the foundation of the Sohlberg Circle, which played a major role in mobilising the two intellectuals' Europeanism to serve the cause of Franco-German rapprochement and later, after 1933, of the political agenda of the Third Reich. Presided by their close friend Abetz, the future German ambassador to occupied Paris, the Sohlberg Circle – later rebaptised as the Comité France-Allemagne – became the laboratory of intellectual collaboration during the occupation.

Jouvenel's participation in the Mont Pèlerin conference laid the basis for a very different kind of collaboration. It meant his consecration as a neoliberal intellectual and his inclusion in its international circles, bringing him into close contact with its most prominent members and boosting his academic career in the English-speaking world. While the political and intellectual distance between the two mountains appears to be be much greater than the geographical distance, Mont Pèlerin and the Sohlberg were part of a political trajectory of two intellectuals that was as strongly marked by continuity as it was by ruptures.