Reader’s Response

“A Fascism in Our Future?”

Edwin S. Harwood

Dale Vree’s “A Fascism in Our Future?” which appeared in the November, 1977, issue of Worldview, provides a tightly reasoned scenario of how fascism might eventually come to America. First, this essay, though short, provides one of the best discussions of the changing contours of American class divisions available, since it requires us to give rather more weight to the cultural and life-style dimensions of social classes than is ordinarily done in sociological analysis. Moreover, Vree is able to locate a cleavage in American society that meshes more realistically with the changes produced by our postindustrial society than the fashionable Marxist treatments—which still linger on in the sociological literature—have been able to achieve. And Vree is able to show, moreover, how this contemporary cleavage has some of the analytically relevant properties that nourished Right-fascism in the 1930’s and that inspire Left-fascisms in the Third World societies of today.

Second, the essay demonstrates Vree’s mastery of the subject of fascism both as a political movement and as a philosophy; as a result, most of the necessary qualifications that a skeptic such as myself would demand before accepting the plausibility of fascism as a likely American future are given full and careful treatment.

But I remain a doubting Thomas nonetheless. Perhaps some of my skepticism derives from my perceptions of what happened in Germany in the 1930’s. (I am much less familiar with the Italian case.) Most sociologists and not a few historians treat the triumph of Nazism as almost an inevitable outcome, given the tremendous, and for a period in the Twenties even catastrophic, economic and social disruptions in Germany. And though when Hitler came to power in the early Thirties there had been considerable stabilization, there was indisputably still plenty of discontent to be aroused and marshaled in those pseudo-Teutonic processions that fired the imaginations of the faithful. Add to this the hundreds of thousands of mobilized party workers, including the paramilitary formations of the S.A., and the collapse of the Weimar order would seem to any fair-minded observer of the Thirties well-nigh inevitable.

Probably the collapse of Weimar was inevitable, given the fury of the animosities ranged against it from both the Right and Left. But Hitler’s success or the success of even a less virulent fascism (which wasn’t in serious contention) owes a great deal to a string of accidents (“lucky breaks,” as we say)—much more so than it owes to any inherent logic of the social and economic situation. It could very easily have turned out otherwise. Had the existing élites coalesced even minimally and been willing to use force, for which there was ample justification, given the level of provocation from both the extreme Left and Right, the National Socialists could not have come to power. The S.A. could not have won in any showdown with the army. Hitler knew this, and, sad to say, his grasp of the historical situation—of the balance of internal power—was uncannily on target by comparison with his adversaries’ understanding of the situation. He provoked just enough to terrorize and weaken resistance, not enough to bring about the destruction of his movement. He allowed the still-powerful conservative and center élites to believe they could co-opt and “domesticate” him and his followers, knowing full well that once in power he would soon have them on his leash. Without these “accidents”—and I call them accidents only because no model of social science explanation can fully predict or measure them—the more probable German scenario would have been a conservative regime resting primarily on the army and the other traditional élites—perhaps something more akin to what Spain became under Franco, which, as Vree correctly points out, was not Fascist in the sense used by scholars (as distinct from the indiscriminate sense in which the concept is used by polemists). And it could have very well been a regime that also preserved some elements of the Weimar constitution, including its civil liberties, even while curbing some of its excesses and greatly limiting the power of its Reichstag.

Thus I am tempted to credit “accident” with considerably more explanatory power in accounting for such severe and extreme developments of an industrial society under tension. Fascism, like communism, is still, in my thinking, a freakish phenomenon in advanced industrial democracies even when these societies are undergoing wracking tensions.

The institutional structure of American politics is another factor that must be taken into account. Even should the élites be discredited and a large segment of the masses competently mobilized, the American political system is so well-designed to withstand the shocks of extremists that one is almost tempted to credit the Founding Fathers with an incredible prescience about the threats the twentieth century held in store for the mass democracies. True, extremists (relatively speaking) have on occasion captured the nominations of the two major parties. But look at what happens to them at the polls in the general election! The weakening of party identification in our electorate is a well-documented trend. But rather than polarizing the electorate it could have the result of diluting and weakening the cleavages needed to sustain an extremist movement in power. For example, a blue-collar worker who splits his ticket may vote for a populist extremist for the presidency while electing to send a moderate liberal to the Congress. I am
not persuaded that the decline in party identification has weakened the two-party system as an institutional safeguard against extremism. Paradoxically, it may even increase the system's invulnerability.

The institutional obstacles to a successful extremist movement in America are fearsome. And even in the unlikely event that extremists were to capture the presidency, it would be most difficult for them to go beyond the limits of constitutional authority without having first infiltrated other elites and sectors. Absent that, they would need to use force. Whether the military would support a plebiscitarian president and the extralegal innovations of his movement without congressional sanction is an interesting issue.

There is another scenario to consider, though it lacks the gratifying tidiness and closure of the forecasts that point to an extreme political solution. It is possible to think that a society might just muddle through in a kind of stalemate of Right, Left, and Center pitting the ideologically aroused and ready-for-action elements against one another while the nonideological and politically confused majority throws votes first this way and that in the manner of the French Third Republic. Degeneration of the economic tissue might continue, angers and discontent would mount, but no clear directive could be given in any direction because of the existence of so many resistant layers of institutional tissue. Were America a smaller society, with a more demographically compact population and a more centrally focused political milieu, and were there fewer constitutional obstacles and safeguards, then the extrapolations Vree develops from his very plausible diagnosis of the American condition might persuade even this cranky intellectual.

But whether or not one agrees with the forecast of a fascism in our future, even with all the cautions that Vree is careful to set forth, one must give serious thought to Vree's diagnosis of the newly emerging socio-political alignments and the tensions they call into being. A growing number of American intellectuals, Irving Kristol and Vree among them, have become more aware of the dangers posed by the estrangement between an intellectual-bureaucratic elite and the "producers" of the American heartland, who are increasingly taxed, regulated, coerced, and sermonized by this elite.

This growing "consciousness" of the emerging socio-political reality on the part of an intellectual vanguard is reminiscent of an earlier liberation by bourgeois intellectuals from bourgeois class interests that Marx had prophesized. But if we want theoretical guidance in these matters today, we would be better off to turn to Vittorio Pareto because Pareto, though he credited material interests (and logical actions related to those interests) as an important motive for much human conduct, was much more aware than Marx of the importance of sentiments in social action. Pareto would have understood how cultural rightism and economic leftism can combine; and he would certainly have understood—considering his own posture on the sentiments of "enlightened" intellectuals of his day—how a vanguard of intellectuals in our time might free themselves of the sentiments and prejudices that undergird the ideological convictions of the Left intelligentsia of today.

Stanley Payne

In general I think that Dale Vree's piece is by far the best analysis of just how and why some new populist/nationalist form approximating historic European fascism might come to America. This past semester I taught an undergraduate seminar on European fascism and at the close recommended the article to my students on precisely those terms. Most discussions of a possible "American fascism" are politically and intellectually vapid, but this one works on the basis of both a coherent historic definition and a realistic appraisal of certain forces at work or potentially at work.

As to future projections, I would agree that some form of populist reaction or new development is likely to occur in the United States during the next two decades, but I rather doubt it will take so stark a form—more for cultural than for economic reasons. I don't think that "cultural rightism" is really that strong among American people in general; hedonism seems to me more widespread at all levels.

Vree is quite right that if something remotely resembling his hypothesis were to develop it would be "called fascism"; the qualification is important. Historic fascism cannot, I think, be revived, but then, if I understand Vree correctly, he was not contending that it could.

My main point of direct disagreement, I suppose, would lie with the contention that historic fascism is scarcely distinguishable from Marxism-Leninism. That is A. James Gregor's position, but I can't accept the formulation. There are some fundamental differences that Gregor tends to slide over: (1) Whereas Italian Fascists developed the theoretical concept of "totalitarian," the structure of the only two "Fascist regimes" was not at all rigorously totalitarian. All Marxist-Leninist regimes, with the exception of Yugoslavia, are totalitarian in structure. It would be hard to prove that structural totalitarianism was ever a goal of most fascist movements. (2) Fascistic national syndicalism or national socialism only proposed a limited economic collectivism, as distinct from the almost complete state collectivism of developed Leninist regimes. (3) There is a difference in the relationship to violence, not on the level of practice—indeed much the same (or possibly even more violent in the case of Leninists)—but on that of theory. Fascists did preach a Sorelian doctrine of violence as innately therapeutic, mixed often with an immediate application of social Darwinism. Leninists stress the practice, not the theory, of violence, and their social Darwinism, while categorical, is less immediate. (4) This leads to a main point—the probably irreversible demise of Fascist culture. As George Mosse and Zeev Sternhell have pointed out, fascism was born of the cultural revolution of 1890-1914 that created a new sensibility of vi-

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talism, the nonrational, the
instinctive—or in different formulat-
tions, the ideal—and the daring, adven-
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rialism and formal rationalism have
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Vree refers to this last problem in
somewhat different terms but at consid-
erable length in the last part of the
article, and his reference to fascism as
providing the only serious secular
philosophical "option to the sated life"
is well taken. The trick about forecast-
ing trends is to pick them up before they
really develop, but my own notion is
that most American people, given half a
chance, will continue to be mediated by
hedonism for some time to come.

Dale Vree Responds:

I am delighted with Professors Payne
and Harwood's serious involvement
with the issues raised by my article.

Regarding Payne's four major criti-
cisms: (1) I am just not sure that fascist
regimes are inherently less totalitarian
than Marxist-Leninist regimes. Are
contemporary Hungary and Poland re-
ally more totalitarian than National
Socialist Germany? Fascist theorists
and regimes certainly advertised their
totalitarian aspirations; however, since
Italy and Germany were preoccupied
with international expansion and war,
they chose to sacrifice total internal
control to the imperatives of continued
production and national unity. Had they
won the war, I suspect their totalitarian
features would have multiplied (at least
in the short run).

(2) Most fascists seemed to
believe—like most Social Democrats,
and those "managerial revolution"
thorists arguing that "control is
ownership"—that government regula-
tion of the economy would achieve the
same objectives as outright government
ownership—and with less internal dis-
location. However, as I pointed out on
page 17 of my article, Mussolini learned
that the capitalists were able to sabotage
his regulatory legislation. When re-
duced to the rump Social Republic of
Salò in 1943, he did take the opportunity
to nationalize industry. Moreover, there
is evidence that Hitler intended to na-
tionalize industry after he won the war.

(3) Payne's remarks about violence are not in conflict with my essay, so I
will not comment.

(4) Payne says that the fascist sensi-
bility was vitalistic, nonrational, in-
stinctive, idealistic—with emphasis on
the daring, adventuresome, heroic; how-
ever, "since 1945 materialism and
formal rationalism have swept the
field." I would argue that Leninist ver-
sions of Marxism are substantially
vitalistic—almost bordering on philo-
sophical idealism. The term usually
applied to Lenin's revision of classical
Marxism is "voluntarism." This ten-
dency is taken to greater lengths in
Third World Leninisms—one thinks of
Mao, Che, and Debray. Does Payne
really think Che wasn't attracted to the
heroic ideal? Mao wasn't a romantic?
Debray didn't display and advocate dar-
ing? And just think of the American
New Left: Certainly Jerry Rubin was non-
materialistic. And if these leaders were such,
surely many of their followers were/are
captured in these vitalistic modes as
well. On the so-called Right, the Wal-
lace movement partook of this selfsame
sensibility. I am reminded of Garry
Wills's description of a Wallace rally:
"Then Wallace came. wafted out fast,
all energy and strut as if held off the
floor by will power. The crowd is ripe.
He radiates a gritty nimbus of piety,
vio1ence, sex. Picked-on and self-
righteous, yet aggressive and darkly
venturous, he has the dingy attractive
air of a B-movie idol..." (Nixon Agoni-
stes, page 56). This was no con-
ventional utilitarian, rational-
bureaucratic politician. He thrilled
partly because materialism and formal
rationalism have not swept the field.

Payne does not doubt that "some
form of populist reaction or new de-
velopment is likely to occur..." howev-
er, he doubts the cultural cleavage will
be sharp because hedonism is "widespread
at all levels." That is debatable, but I
won't dispute it here. What I would
point out is that an economic crisis
would accentuate cultural conflict.
Hedonism is in part a function of afflu-
ence. Economic crisis would surely hit
the working and lower middle classes
hardest, wiping out their wherewithal
for hedonistic expression (presuming,
of course, an economic crisis would not
hit these people so hard as to destroy all
their hope, all their faith in the fruits of
defered gratification). At that point
these classes may well have a phalanx of
white Jesse Jacksons preaching against
privilege, cultural decadence, and the
traps of self-indulgence.

Even if, for the sake of argument, one
were to agree that materialism and for-
mal rationalism have swept the field, we
must not forget that pendulums do
swing. There is a whole school of social
theory that argues that the anomic and
alienation characteristic of materialis-
tic, rational-bureaucratic societies pre-
pare the way for fanatical and totalitar-
ian movements. Certainly—and I do not
intend this pejoratively—we are now
witnessing a remarkable display of
interest and involvement in Eastern
religions, "born again" Evangelical-
ism, and neo-Pentecostalism, which
must reflect a profound ache for self-
discipline and transcendent meaning in
this country. Of course political extrem-
ism is also able to tap this craving.

Regarding Harwood's criticisms:
Since I stated on page 14 that mine was
"only one plausible scenario among
many," and since I certainly did not
speak the language of inevitability, I
would not take exception to any of his
comments on the role of accidents in
history.

Nor would I take issue with his cau-
sions about the ability of our constitu-
tional and electoral systems' ability to
frustrate those who work within them.
However, I was speculating about a
"plebian mass movement directed at the
levelling of both economic and cultural
élites" (page 16), and it would not be
my expectation that such a movement
would content itself with running can-
didates for political office. I was not
talking about mere social reform—but
rather about revolution. Extrapolal rev-
olution has its own obstacles, of course,
but if it could happen in a Guattist
France (where it almost did but, because
of a few "lucky breaks," didn't), it
could happen here too. Movements
aren't invincible, but Establishments
aren't either.