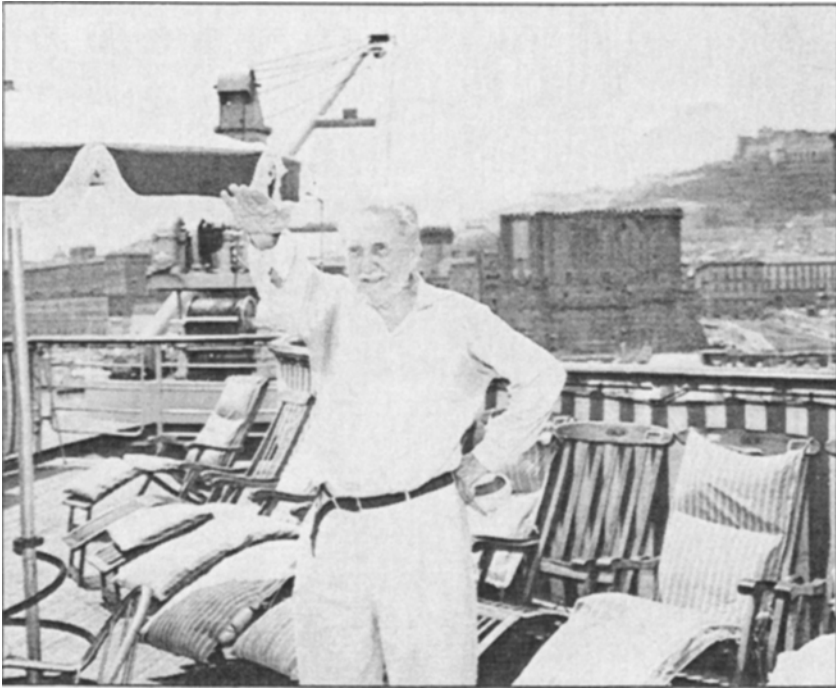


Modern Fascism

The Threat to the
Judeo-Christian
Worldview

Gene Edward Veith, Jr.

Modern Fascism



World Wide Photos

EZRA POUND: poet, critic, and godfather of modernism. Pound was also a propagandist for Mussolini. Arrested for treason at the end of World War II, Pound was committed to a mental hospital until 1958. Upon his release, at the urging of America's literary and intellectual establishment, Pound returned to Italy. The photograph shows him upon his arrival on the liner *Christoforo Colombo* in Naples, Italy, in April 1958, at age 72, affirming his post-Holocaust National Socialism with the fascist salute. For further information, see especially pages 116–118 and *Ezra Pound* in the index.

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To the memory of my late colleague,
Professor William Houser

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Foreword

Like all volumes in the Concordia Scholarship Today series, this book offers insights that relate to current concerns. The assumption is that an analysis and clarification of issues that beset us today, viewed against a broadened and deepened understanding of the Christian faith, will lead us to make considered and responsible applications and in so doing help us to “comprehend the love of God in Christ” (Eph. 3: 17–18).

In exploring the issues in this book, Christian responsibility and integrity are a primary concern. While the reader may differ with the author’s analyses and/or interpretations, the following must be among our overriding common concerns: Biblical teachings related to the issue must be clearly defined without compromise. Biblical doctrine needs to be distinguished from the practice or application of doctrine. Information and alternative choices must be carefully considered and clearly understood.

Ideas have consequences. That truism is frightening, even for the most astute analysts and thinkers, in a day when a whirlpool of confusing ideological currents seems to engulf us. In recent years the alarm bell has been sounded in a spate of books and articles by perceptive and insightful authors, warning us to be watchful in every corner of life—*Illiberal Education* by Dinesh D’Souza; *Prof-scams* by Charles Sykes; *Under God: Religion and American Politics* by Gary Wills; *Defending the Declaration* by Gary Amos; *Agenda for Theology: After Modernity—What?* by Thomas C. Oden; “The Hands That Would Shape Our Souls” by Paul Wilkes (*Atlantic Monthly*, December 1990); *The Prodigal Press* by Marvin Olasky; and many more. All clearly show that analyzing trends in order to find a modus vivendi is becoming so challenging and intractable that it soon may elude us completely.

Earlier, Dr. Gene Edward Veith, Jr., offered a positive personal perspective for conscientious Christians in *Loving God with All Your*

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Mind (Crossway, 1987). In *Reading Between the Lines* (Crossway, 1990) he offered substantive, practical, Christian guidelines for critical reading of literature. Here, in *Modern Fascism: Liquidating the Judeo-Christian Worldview*, he renders invaluable service by clearly singling out and defining fascism, a complex core of ideas that exalts the nation-state or race, disregards the individual and the individual's rights, employs thought control and strict regimentation, and disregards moral objectivity, sweeping everything and every one in its wake. The author shows how fascism is shaping society today, unwittingly as well as knowingly. He carefully clarifies fascism's relation to other ideas that likewise mold our thinking. Most important, he skillfully and convincingly combines historical narrative, cultural criticism, and theological analysis, offering much-needed guidance and hope for Americans, jostled and shaken by numerous ideological crosscurrents that threaten personal tranquillity and stability.

A reading of *Modern Fascism* shows that Dr. Veith has indirectly exposed the fallacy in the very common criticism that belief in theological dogma inhibits an open-minded search for knowledge and truth. He convincingly demonstrates that Christian theology provides a useful framework for acquiring and for integrating knowledge and in no way stifles the pursuit of truth. A sincere, conscientious effort to clarify biblical principles and apply them is far superior to relying on a framework of secular relativism in a society that prides itself on pluralism and individualism and yet in some respects is captive to fascist-type domination. In true Christian fashion, Dr. Veith exposes, explains, and counsels without dogmatically prescribing responses. In so doing, he achieves a difficult goal he has set for himself of clarifying the connection that often goes unnoticed between fascism and existentialism, theological liberalism, and the avant garde. This is a book that makes a difference.

The Publisher

Preface

Fascism is back. That is, it refuses to go away. Fifty years after World War II, it keeps intruding upon our attention in odd facts and disturbing news: Mussolini's 29-year-old granddaughter runs for parliament in Italy on a neofascist ticket. Former member of the American Nazi party David Duke runs for president of the United States. Despite media attention and some populist support, Duke meets ignominious defeat; but Alessandra Mussolini, along with 34 other members of the new fascist party, is elected.

Skinheads with their shaved heads and combat boots seem to be everywhere in Europe, staging soccer riots, beating up foreigners, painting swastika graffiti. In the United States, young skinheads are passing out racist literature on street corners and bolstering the membership of neo-Nazi cults such as the Aryan Nation.

The lunatic fringe, of course, is always with us, but we are also being confronted by signs of fascism as a larger social movement. Germany is having race riots again. The French are electing more and more neofascists to parliament. The implosion of communism was a great victory for democracy, but the vacuum has been filled by intense, violent ethnic nationalism and the revival of overt fascist movements that had been suppressed since World War II but are still very much alive. When Boris Yeltsin says that he is worried about a fascist coup in Russia, he has cause to worry, and so do we.

In the meantime, unsettling cultural trends are intensifying throughout the West: cynicism about democracy; a yearning for "charismatic leadership"; economic disaffection; moral skepticism, a cultural irrationalism that breaks out in acts of inexplicable violence.

Fascism is back in academia. A recent biography of the existentialist sage Martin Heidegger has uncovered his extensive involvement in the Nazi party. Those influenced by him—theorists, critics, and theologians—do not know quite what to do. Many are rushing

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to his defense; many are taking a second look at the most influential philosopher of the 20th century.

Soon on the heels of the Heidegger scandal was the revelation that the major deconstructionist critic Paul De Man had written anti-Semitic articles for fascist newspapers. This news staggered the post-modern theorists with their leftist politics and their rejection of all authority. Many scholars simply cannot reconcile the intellectual sophistication of Heidegger and the progressive skepticism of De Man with the brutality of fascism. It turns out that many of these scholars, like the public as a whole, have a strange gap in their learning, a sort of collective amnesia: They have no clear idea of what fascism actually taught.

Thus far more disturbing than the personal failings of Heidegger and De Man is the ideology that is coalescing (partly from their influence) in today's intellectual establishment. Cultural determinism, the reduction of all social relationships to issues of sheer power; the idea that one's identity is centered in one's ethnicity or race; the rejection of the concept of the individual—such ideas have become academic commonplaces. The project in contemporary thought of dismantling Western civilization and critiquing “humanist” values (such as liberty, reason, and objective moral principles) is not new. All of these ideas are direct echoes of the fascist theorists of the 1930s.

The popular culture is the most fertile breeding ground for fascism. In the 1930s, avant-garde artists shocked the bourgeoisie with their aesthetic theories that glorified violence and the release of primitive emotions. Today, if you would like examples of early fascist aesthetics, simply go to the latest Hollywood blockbuster, turn on MTV, or go to a Heavy Metal concert. Here you will see realized the fascists' artistic ideals: pleasure from violence; the thrill of moral rebellion; the cult of the Aryan body. The grisly blood-letting of a slasher movie; the body-builder who takes the law into his own hands by machine-gunning his enemies; the masses of teenagers slam-dancing as Metallica sings, “Scream, as I'm killing you!”—such art is the quintessence of the fascist aesthetic.

Contemporary mass politics is very different from the democratic ideals of Madison and Jefferson. Instead of rational analysis of issues and reasoned debate, our political discourse turns on image manipulation through the mass media. The electronic media

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has created a genuine mass culture. Visual images take the place of language; emotionalism takes the place of logic. Politics is trivialized; citizens are manipulated, but they are molded into a common will. This was Goebbel's dream.

Moral issues are today almost impossible to discuss in objective terms. Euthanasia is back. People clamor for their right to die. One out of four pregnancies ends in abortion, amounting to millions and millions. In discussing such issues, it becomes evident that perhaps the majority of people today have no concept of an objective morality that transcends the individual and the culture. Morality is reduced to social utility or the assertion of the will. This was precisely the Nazi ethic.

Only five decades ago, the world was in the nightmare of war and Holocaust. We seem to have forgotten everything. Putting aside the images of goose-stepping villains from the movies, does anyone remember exactly what the fascists believed? Such forgetfulness is probably natural—after waking from a nightmare, the conscious mind erases its memory as soon as it can. But the nightmare of 50 years ago was no dream. It really happened, and we must be diligent lest it happen again.

We must know what fascism is so that we can recognize it when we see it. This will mean undoing certain misconceptions. Fascism is *not* conservatism. It is *not* the "right wing" as the polar opposite of the "left wing." Such simplistic definitions and neat dichotomies may carry some truth, but they hide more than they reveal. Specifically, they hide the modernness of fascism, its appeal to progressives and the avant-garde. Fascism has always been on the cutting edge.

It is particularly important to know, precisely, why the Nazis hated the Jews. Racism alone cannot explain the virulence of Nazi anti-Semitism. What did they see in the Jews that they thought was so inferior? What was the Jewish legacy that, in their mind, so poisoned Western culture? What were the Aryan ideals that the Nazis sought to restore, once the Jews and their influence were purged from Western culture?

The fascists aligned themselves not only against the Jews but against what the Jews contributed to Western civilization. A transcendent God, who reveals a transcendent moral law, was anathema to the fascists. Such transcendence, they argued, alienates human beings from nature and from themselves. Fascist intellectuals sought

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to forge a new spirituality of immanence, focused upon nature, human emotions, and the community. The fascists sought to restore the ancient pre-Christian consciousness, the ancient mythic sensibility, in which individuals experience unity with nature, with each other, and with their own deepest impulses.

Fascism was essentially a spiritual movement. It was a revolt against the Judeo-Christian tradition, that is to say, against the Bible. Some fascists believed that Christianity could be purged of its Jewish elements; others believed it should be completely replaced. Some advocated a syncretistic Christianity, revising the faith to make it accord with the new culture. Others sought completely different kinds of religious experience. The fascist rebellion against transcendence restored the ancient pagan consciousness. With it came barbarism, a barbarism armed with modern technology and intellectual sophistication. The liquidation of the transcendent moral law and "Jewish" conscience allowed the resurgence of the most primitive and destructive emotions, the unleashing of original sin.

This book is a study of 20th-century fascism, before, during, and after Hitler. There is a continuity in 20th-century thought, of which fascism is an important and often neglected part. I will be exploring the connection between fascism and existentialism, theological liberalism, and the avant-garde. My goal is to present the ideas of the fascist theorists from the inside, to make clear their internal logic and the reasons for their appeal. My method is a perhaps unusual combination of historical narrative, cultural criticism, and theological analysis. Despite my criticisms of postmodern ideology, this book is something of an exercise in postmodern scholarship.

I expect this work to be controversial, but those who question what I say about fascist ideology and its modern context may consult the wealth of recent scholarship on fascism, World War II, and the Holocaust. The work of the specialists, analyzing primary sources and sifting through historical evidence, deserves urgent study and application. Robert Lifton's *The Nazi Doctors* should be required reading for those involved in the controversies of medical ethics. Church historians such as Robert Ericksen, Franklin Littell, and Ernst Helmreich need to be studied when seminaries address the question of the relationship between Christ and culture. Although he has come under criticism by Holocaust scholars for some of his Heideggerian tendencies, Ernst Nolte's phenomenological analysis of

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fascism is a valuable resource, as is Zeev Sternhell's historical study of the origins of fascism. Victor Farias's biography of Heidegger not only reveals controversial facts about the great philosopher, but vividly recreates the academic climate in Hitler's Germany. Jewish authors such as George Steiner, Max Weinreich, and Elie Wiesel were invaluable in helping me to formulate my thesis. The literature of the Holocaust looms as an inexhaustible resource for the study of the human condition, and I am grateful to David Hirsch, with his eloquent polemics against postmodernist evasions, for underscoring that fact.

Thanks as always goes to my family, especially my wife Jackquelyn. I would also like to acknowledge my friends, students, and colleagues with whom I have tried out these ideas. David Berger, presently head librarian at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, was particularly helpful in my research. I owe a special debt to my late colleague William Houser, to whom this book is dedicated. A communications scholar, Bill was the one who drew the contrast between the worldview implicit in Leni Riefenstahl's cinematic tribute to Hitler, "The Triumph of the Will," and that of Luther's "The Bondage of the Will." Our discussions helped to precipitate this project.

Thanks too should go to Wilbert Rosin, editor of Concordia Publishing House, who stretched some parameters and asked to publish this book. This is, in fact, an example of Lutheran scholarship. The Lutheran tradition is often blamed for Germany's easy capitulation to Hitler, so this attack against fascism may be seen as an act of penance (if Lutherans believed in penance). But I write not just as a Lutheran but as a *confessional* Lutheran, committed to Scripture and to doctrine, to the transcendent spirituality of historical Christianity that has been so under attack throughout the century. I hope I am in the tradition, not of the syncretists, but of the confessional Lutherans in Hitler's Germany who stood up against the times and gave their lives for their faith.

“A Disease of the Times”

Introduction

By killing the Jews, Western culture would eradicate those who had “invented” God. . . . The Holocaust is a reflex, the more complete for being long inhibited, of natural sensory consciousness, of instinctual polytheistic and animist needs.

—George Steiner¹

This book is an attempt to probe what David H. Hirsch has described as “the dark secret that European high culture in its most advanced phase not only was powerless to prevent the construction and implementation of the death camps, but actually provided the ideological base on which the death camps were built.”² An even darker secret is that the very same “advanced phase” of modern thought that brought us the death camps has continued to advance in the same direction, as if nothing had ever happened.

Thomas Mann, the German novelist who knew but ultimately resisted the seduction of fascism, has called it “a disease of the times which is at home everywhere and from which no country is free.”³ Even after Hitler’s defeat, Mann continued to refer to “the fascist era of the Occident in which we live and, despite the military victory over fascism, will long continue to live.”⁴

The defeat of Hitler and the Axis powers in World War II meant the military defeat of fascism, but an ideology cannot be defeated by military power alone. Ideas linger. They are reborn when the time is right again, or they come out of hiding in strange new shapes. The major scandal of contemporary thought is that, despite World War and Holocaust, the intellectual heritage of fascism has never been repudiated.

Oddly enough, few people today have a clear idea of exactly what it is that fascists believe. Fascism is not merely the seizure of

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power by madmen. It is certainly not conservatism. Nor can it be understood simply as racism, totalitarianism, or “right wing extremism.” These may be symptoms, but they are not the essence of the disease. Fascism is a worldview.

The elements of this worldview derive from romanticism, Darwinism, and existentialism. They are part of the mainstream of Western thought. As such, they were basic assumptions of the intellectual elite of the 1930s. They remain so today.

This worldview soon acquired spiritual implications. Fascist totalitarianism was more than a system of political control; it was totalitarian in seeking to encompass and to direct all of life. Fascism emerged not only as a political and economic system but as a new religion, whose promise was to heal the alienation of the modern world. The emotional life would be freed, harmony with nature would be achieved, and the culture would be revitalized. This new worldview defined itself against the existing spiritual framework—that of the Jews and their Bible. In rejecting not only the Bible but objective meaning, transcendent morality, and the authority of language itself, the fascists arrayed themselves against the Word.

The Theology of Fascism

Fascism can be understood most clearly in terms of its arch-enemy, the Jew. Just as the Nazis sought to exterminate the Jews, fascism sought to eliminate the Judeo-Christian tradition from Western culture.

Ernst Nolte has defined fascism as “the practical and violent resistance to transcendence.”⁵ Whereas the Judeo-Christian tradition focuses on a transcendent God and a transcendent moral law, fascist spirituality is centered upon what is tangible. Nature and the community assume the mystical role they held in the ancient mythological religions. Religious zeal is displaced away from the transcendent onto the immanent: the land, the people, the blood, the will.

Fascists seek an organic, neomythological unity of nature, the community, and the self. The concepts of a God who is above nature and a moral law that is above society are rejected. Such transcendent beliefs are alienating, cutting off human beings from their natural existence and from each other.

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Specifically, such transcendent beliefs were condemned as being “Jewish.” Fascist anti-Semitism was not merely racial—despite the biological race theory that dominated National Socialism. The rationale for anti-Semitism was also the *ideas* of the Jews. According to fascist theorists, the Jewish influence—that is, the idea of a transcendent religion and a transcendent moral law—was responsible for the ills of Western culture. The target of the fascists was not only the Jews but the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Christianity was to be purged of the Bible. Because Christianity has always been open to culture, there have always been versions of Christianity that lend themselves to becoming absorbed by the culture. Most fascists saw the need of organized religion to give a sacred status to visible social institutions. This might be accomplished under the form of a romanticized Catholicism or the civil religion of Protestantism. Liberal theology, which originated in pre-war Germany, challenged the church’s traditional preoccupation with transcendent issues such as the salvation of the soul. Instead, it gave the church new, this-worldly agendas centering on culture and politics. Biblical criticism as practiced by the liberal theologians weakened the authority of the Bible, and thus diminished the “Jewish” presence within Christianity.

Although fascism was willing to accept Christianity insofar as it could be transformed into a state nature-religion, the more radical factions sought the restoration of the pre-Christian tribal religions. What the fascist religious reforms really amounted to was the establishment of a primitivistic neopaganism. The fascists sought to recover the mythological consciousness, which brought nature, the culture, and the psyche into a unity. Casting off the Judeo-Christian tradition, as codified in the Hebraic scriptures, did not bring on a new spiritual order. Instead, it resulted in a resurgence of the most primitive spirituality—the old pagan order of the divine-king, the sacred community, the communion with nature, and the sacrifices of blood.

Fascism represented a revival of ancient pagan culture over against the Judeo-Christian tradition. The fascists glorified the primitive, as we do now. The mythological cultures may have promoted psychic integration, communal unity, and harmony with the environment. But they also demanded strict conformity to the group, made social criticism impossible, glorified war, and allowed such

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brutal practices as infanticide and euthanasia.⁶ Both these positive and these negative points of mythological cultures were realized in fascism.

Today, neopaganism is coming back into vogue. In the religion sections of the book store chains, books on astrology, fortune-telling, and the occult crowd out Judeo-Christian books. The New Age movement is reviving ancient pagan practices such as attending to oracles (channelers) and sacred objects (crystals). In Christianity, both conservative and liberal churches are shifting their attention away from a transcendent focus. Instead of prophetic judgment and the offer of salvation, many churches are proclaiming a this-worldly gospel. Political activism, whether of the left or the right, is consuming the energy of American Christianity. Both liberals and conservatives are downplaying transcendent doctrines in favor of subjective experience and the emotional fulfillment that comes from losing one's identity in a larger group. What Ernst Nolte describes as "the resistance to transcendence" is characterizing contemporary religion, as well as the culture as a whole.

Fascism and Modern Thought

Martin Heidegger, who may be the most sophisticated and influential philosopher of the 20th century, we now know was an active, ideologically committed Nazi. Recent revelations about the extent of Heidegger's Nazism⁷ have proven embarrassing and bewildering to his followers. It seems outrageous that someone with a mind like Heidegger's could succumb to Adolf Hitler's party line. Heidegger may have been an opportunist, some are saying, but his political activities should not be allowed to detract from his philosophical contributions. His existentialism should not be discredited by the ad hominem attack. That there may be a genuine connection between Heidegger's existentialism and the ideology of National Socialism is almost impossible for many people to consider.

When it was discovered that the postmodern critic Paul De Man had been a propagandist for a pro-Nazi periodical, his followers were plunged into confusion.⁸ Surely De Man's methodology of deconstruction can have nothing to do with fascism. Deconstruction throws all objective meaning and all authority into question. As such, it must be a defense against fascism. Whatever De Man did in his

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youth in occupied Belgium, the reasoning goes, should by no means discredit his intellectual contribution. It seems almost unthinkable that deconstruction and fascism may be related.

Whether or not Heidegger and De Man were naive in their allegiance to fascism, the controversy about their involvement does show the naivete of contemporary scholarship. It is as if the memory of fascism—what it was and why it was so appealing—has been suppressed from our cultural consciousness.

Heidegger and De Man were by no means alone in their enthusiasm for Mussolini and Hitler. As Stephen Spender has admitted, “some of the greatest modern writers sympathized with fascism.”⁹ Spender cites Ezra Pound, D. H. Lawrence, and W. B. Yeats. Alastair Hamilton, in his book *The Appeal of Fascism: A Study of Intellectuals and Fascism, 1919–1945*, discusses these writers and adds to their company George Bernard Shaw, Wyndham Lewis, T. E. Hulme, Roy Campbell, and the early T. S. Eliot. Avant-garde artistic movements—Vorticists, Italian Futurists, German Expressionists—included many devotees of fascism.

We could add prominent and influential figures from other fields. Carl Jung, the psychiatrist and advocate of mythological consciousness, flirted at least briefly with fascism.¹⁰ Margaret Sanger, founder of Planned Parenthood, promoted Hitler’s eugenics program in the United States.¹¹

The list of fascist sympathizers reads like a *Who’s Who* of 20th-century culture. To be sure, many of them recanted their earlier allegiance once the war broke out and the horrific implications of fascism became clear. Nevertheless, they made up the intellectual and cultural climate that brought Hitler into power.

Fascism is a major element of 20th-century thought and culture. To suppress this truth is to evade history. Fascism cannot be understood apart from its connections to the mainstream of modern culture. Conversely, 20th-century thought cannot be understood apart from its connections to fascism.

The pro-Nazi modernists continue to be influential. Ezra Pound has continued to influence modern literature. It did not matter to poets or critics that he was a fascist. Heidegger is still revered in universities and in theological seminaries. His allegiance to Adolf Hitler has not detracted from his popularity among intellectuals and theologians. The ways of thinking and the cultural trends which

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precipitated the Nazi horrors did not go away just because Hitler died in a bunker. Indeed, as the memory of Hitler fades, they are more and more coming back into vogue.

Robert Casillo has studied how scholars treat Ezra Pound's fascism. No one can deny Pound's virulent anti-Semitism and his propaganda broadcasts for Mussolini. Still, most critics downplay his fascism. They focus instead on what they see as Pound's more positive contributions to 20th-century culture. They study Pound's antimonotheism, his agrarianism, his neopaganism, his glorification of myth, his love of nature, his insistence on the concrete and suspicion of the abstract. Such aspects of Pound's writings, treated in isolation, are presented as progressive and humane.

What most Pound scholars apparently do not realize is that these values all come from fascism. Antimonotheism, agrarianism, neopaganism, mythological consciousness, nature mysticism, antirationalism, and related positions “taken together form a typical, mutually reinforcing fascist constellation.”¹² Such beliefs—even more than his broadcasts for Mussolini—constitute his fascism. Yet contemporary scholars praise them, oblivious that they are praising fascism. That scholars find these ideas progressive and humane is proof that the intellectual climate is still naively open to fascism.

To implicate today's intellectual establishment with fascism would seem to be absurd on the face of it. There are few if any members of the Klan, the White Aryan Nation, or other ultraright hate groups on university faculties. The academic culture, on the contrary, tends to favor the left. Marxism may be fashionable, but never fascism. Among our intellectual elite, racism is universally deplored. Authoritarianism of every kind is questioned. The new political activism on college campuses asserts the rights of women and minority groups and attempts to root out every vestige of oppression. Even if a connection could be shown between fascism and deconstruction, it could hardly change the fact that deconstructive critics are radical, not reactionary.

But if the modernist thinkers were naive in unwittingly opening the Pandora's box of fascism, postmodernist thinkers should beware of the same naivete. A set of ideas is emerging from today's academic world that is startlingly reminiscent of what the fascist theorists were saying in the 1930s: individual identity is a myth, insofar as identity is really determined by culture and ethnicity; laws and social con-

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ventions are only masks for power; human-centered values are part of a corrupt Western civilization; the transcendent meaning of reason, objectivity, and language is an illusion. Is it possible that those who hold these views do not realize that these are also the doctrines of fascism?

Those who reject the concept of individual identity as a myth and believe that all reality is socially constructed should consider the political implications of what they are saying. With those assumptions, can there be such a thing as individual freedom? Can there be any limits on the power of the state?

Those who assert that all laws, governments, relationships, and institutions are nothing more than patterns of oppression and masks for the raw exercise of power should realize that these assumptions cut both ways. A power reductionist may uncover injustices and take the side of the oppressed. A power reductionist could just as easily justify repression as inevitable and rationalize the unrestrained use of power.

Those who assault Western civilization in favor of ethnicity, primitivism, environmentalism, and subjectivism should realize that their critiques and the alternatives they present are almost identical to those made by the theorists of fascism. Those who gleefully deconstruct “humanistic values” should wonder what sorts of values will take their place. What would a “new morality” that is “nonhumanistic” look like? Might it resemble what we now call evil?

Today’s postmodernists criticize “humanistic” values in what they consider a liberating way. They attack the concept of individual identity to restore a sense of social responsibility. They uncover the hidden workings of power to expose oppression based on race, gender, or class. They have the best of motives. They are certainly not fascists.

And yet, they need to realize that the fascists of the 1930s also sought to dismantle Western civilization and its human-centered values. They too attacked the concept of individual identity and taught that reality is socially constructed. They too insisted that underlying all institutions is naked power. They too prized ethnicity. They too were environmentalists. They too questioned the objectivity of meaning.

The difference is that contemporary thinkers in this vein bemoan the structures of power and oppression that they uncover. They still

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work with unexamined moral assumptions, overlooking the way they have demolished the basis of those assumptions.

The fascists, on the other hand, took these assumptions to their logical conclusions. If individual autonomy is an illusion, then everyone should find identity in the communal state. If society shapes the individual, then let it do so, replacing individual liberty with propaganda and social control. If power underlies all social institutions, then let us exercise power. If race and ethnicity is a determining value, then ideas should be evaluated in racial and ethnic terms. If societies are intrinsically racist, with one ethnic group oppressing the others, then let us be racist, protecting our racial identity in this power struggle by subjugating the other races.

Surely few if any postmodern thinkers would go this far. My concern is not so much with the current intellectual scene as it is with what might come next. What will the “post-contemporary” movement look like, once the postmodernists have successfully discredited objectivity, freedom, and morality? What sort of society will be erected on the rubble, once the Western tradition is deconstructed? Most of the modernist proto-fascists shrank back in horror when they saw the consequences of their ideas as acted out by Adolf Hitler. My concern is that today’s postmodernists may be likewise unleashing a demon.

As David Hirsch has pointed out, the ostensible goals of postmodernists—equal rights for women and minorities, social and economic justice—derive from Judeo-Christian and democratic values and predate deconstructionism. They can not be derived from deconstruction alone, which cannot give a conceptual base for human rights and individual freedom.¹³

Although the postmodernists claim to be critical of the social ills of contemporary life—runaway technology and technocracy, the power of the state, capitalism, imperialism, colonialism, oppression of the downtrodden (all of which have been targets of respectable pre-postmodern liberal criticism as well)—their ideology carries with it, inevitably, the less desirable tendencies of their patron saint, Heidegger [:] Their attack on the Cartesian human subject and on reason itself; their contempt for the values of liberalism, of human and individual rights, and of constitutional democracy, . . . their depreciation of human values (which they

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prefer to call bourgeois values) and their mocking of any notion of “transcendence.”¹⁴

Such postmodern notions are not only Heideggerian, they are specifically fascist.

Today, explicit fascism of the old school has returned. The collapse of communism has spawned new cults of national socialism. Race and ethnicity are once again central issues, from Belgrade to Los Angeles. Neo-Nazi groups such as the White Aryan Nation grow into subcultures, especially among white prison inmates. Anti-Semitism is back. Skinheads hand out fascist literature on street corners and in schools. Neo-Nazi parties gain political power in Europe and stage riots in which non-European immigrants are killed.

Such extremist organizations, particularly with their appeal to young people, are dangerous; but the more subtle and widespread trends with parallels to fascism may be even more dangerous. An aesthetics of violence—which has clear affinities to the Nazi aesthetic—is dominating both the work of serious artists and that of popular filmmakers. Avant-garde critics are demolishing all objective values and meanings, reducing them, in the fascist way, to issues of sheer power. Irrationalism—a key feature of fascist ideology—remains an academic exercise, but it is now a characteristic of the whole culture.

The fascist dream of a mass consciousness, in which the individual is swallowed up into a greater whole by the power of propaganda, can now be realized by the impact of the mass media. The trivialization of our political discourse, the subjectivity and politicizing of religion, the decline of language before the visual image, and the collapse of moral objectivity may well foreshadow an emerging fascist worldview.

The slogan of the Holocaust survivors is “never again!” To keep such a pledge, it is necessary to recognize and to name those modes of thinking that, perhaps inadvertently, led to the Nazi atrocities. This must also involve recovering what the Nazis so hated in the Jews—an ethic and a worldview grounded in the transcendent Word.