

RICHARD SAULL, *Capital, Race and Space*, Volume 1: *The Far-Right from Bonapartism to Fascism* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2023)

Fascist studies are presently dominated by a largely non-ideological paradigm, albeit one deriving from liberal institutions and figures. Outside this prevailing “new consensus” model, the relentlessly durable theoretical corpus of Marxism has developed its own interpretations of fascism, harking back to a century-old intellectual tradition. From Gramsci to Benjamin, from Lukács to Bloch, from Trotsky to Thalheimer, from Adorno and Horkheimer to Poulantzas, from Laclau to Habermas, a panoply of authoritative leftist thinkers has left an undeniable mark on the understanding of fascism in the 20th century, holding an increasingly relevant influence throughout the 21st. As historical materialism undergoes continuous adaptation, authors such as Richard Saull, intent on developing an “international historical sociology of the far-right social and political movements” (as stated in his institutional presentation at Queen Mary’s University of London School of Politics and International Relations) employ leftist cannons, often in heterodox fashion. In the massive two-volume *Capital, Race and Space*, Saull takes on a synoptic retrospective of the far-right, in a chronological span ranging from mid-19th century revolutionary convulsions to contemporaneity. With international dynamics superposed upon local narratives, the approach illustrates the author’s conviction that “the international constitutes the ideology and politics of the far-right in both the material and imaginary sense” (p. xi). An inherent conditionality is attributed to all far-right permutations, from the inter-war era fascism as an integral product of “mass politics, capitalist imperialism, racism and the legacies of total war,” to the proximate “neoliberal far-right,” purportedly emerging out of the dysfunctional mechanics of “transnational capitalism, transnational political and legal governance, and a populist political mood connected to ‘anti-politics’” (p. xii).

Before an ample historiographical excursus, a vantage point of “recurring crises” registers the structural contradictions of liberal capitalist modernity. Several distinctions are operated within the far-right spectrum, but the overall perspective remains excessively holistic. Hence, the definition of the far-right as a “distinct ideological representation and articulation of politics and form of political agency connected to specific social layers and spaces” (p. 5), confined by political and social context. There is an obvious degree of hermeticism contained in this perspective, as well as a misguided analytical focus, which pushes the ideological dimension to the margins. Furthermore, structural social interpretations often perpetuate classist tropes, such as the far-right designating the “petty bourgeoisie” as one of its main constituents, anti-Semitism incentivising the lower capitalist hierarchy towards far-right adhesion, organised labour presumably less “vulnerable to far-right appeals” (p. 9) and so on. Such contentious lines of argument have been systematically dismantled in fascist studies over the past few decades.

The volume's opening section offers an introduction to far-right studies as an integral part of comparative politics, favouring historical Marxism. While overly reliant on the latter, the research framework does not lack clarity and cohesion, without that making it any less problematic. Briefly, it discerns among five interfering layers: *longue durée* chronology, structural determinants of capitalism, international developments, inner contradictions of democratic liberalism and pervasive influence of racism. Approaching these features piecemeal, the analysis is unable to surmount leftist intellectual clichés on several essential issues. The revolutionary nature of the far-right is only partially admitted, despite a rich historiographic tradition examining it at length. Instead, revolution is "contextualized" stereotypically as a "counter-revolutionary animus towards the left" (p. 58), a paradoxical fall back on the Noltean approach to which the *Historikerstreit* has dealt decisive blows almost half a century ago. Likewise untenable are the arguments which infirm fascism's claims of socialist ascent, on the grounds of them being mere discourses, contradicted by national-socialist action. It is a typical example of throwing the baby out with the bathwater, since in denying the ingenuity of fascist claims, essential connections between ideology and praxis are inherently rejected. On the flipside, several insights present substantial heuristic potential and sound methodological approaches. They examine the perils of historicization and its "inability to explain the reproduction of the far-right over time" (p. 19), given an analytical severance of previous and ulterior sequential connections. Moreover, challenges brought about by the reification of inter-war era fascism are justifiably described as "historically short-sighted" (p. 20), shadowing the far-right's distant origins and future reverberations.

As far as Marxist historiography is concerned, we must note that its century-old isolation, which the author tentatively deplores, was mostly a self-imposed limitation. Nevertheless, a useful dichotomy distinguishes between, on the one hand, political economy approaches which bridged capitalism and fascism and, on the other hand, the social, psychological and aesthetic frameworks which explored the "individual subjectivity" of fascism (p. 25). The latter, connected to the Frankfurt School, preserved the epistemic value of left-wing thinking, often times through hybridizations with the liberal mainstream, which the author conveniently overlooks. From the more sophisticated strands of Marxism, Saull extracts resilient notions such as Poulantzas' concept of politics being prone to fascism on account of their position within a "hierarchical imperial system," or Gramsci's references to "hegemony" and "passive revolution" conditioned as much by external factors as domestic concerns.

A central notion to Marxism's intellectual genealogy involves "Bonapartism," extracted from Marx's influential typological description of Napoleon III's Second Empire as a "crisis-driven re-organization of state and politics whereby the norms, institutions and relations of liberal representative or democratic order are suspended on the altar of the maintenance of the capitalist *social order*" (p. 38). This political metamorphosis model is appropriated by later generations of Marxist thinkers as a foundational myth of sorts. A "generic prototype for a far-right form of political economy and state" (p. 42) is thus deciphered, representative for future dynamics of the far-right, as it engages both capital and the liberal state.

Leaving aside the specifics of Bonapartism, Saull advances a *longue durée* projection evoking a chain of recurrences of the far-right from the 1848 revolutions until the present day, diachronically determined by four constants: capitalist “spatial politics,” the pressure of international forces, the inner “antinomies of liberalism” and the “master signifier of race” (p. 44). The reproduction of ancestral structures in an evolving capitalist context is explained through the theses of Bloch, who illuminates the perpetual strive towards an anachronistic recovery of a mythologized past. Evidently, as fascist studies have proven, fascist temporal dynamics are more complex than merely restorative acts of retrospective fetishism, with the past being integral to the fascist paligenetic project. It is precisely such theoretical gains that the reviewed work repeatedly omits, opening major analytical blind spots. Further on, while acknowledging the fundamental opposition of the liberal and far-right models, Saull introduces a doubtful degree of ambiguity in nuancing their differences, even though the historiography of fascism has already clarified delineations between fascism and the generic establishment as they vied for political power, institutional control, social permeation and cultural influence. Instead, these are all reduced to “para-political manifestations,” pertaining to a relation of the public sphere to the political processes that is external to conventional politics. The realm of the para-political is the one in which the liberal state in crisis “transfers, legitimizes and empowers far-right forces” (p. 67). As for race, it becomes a core signifier of the far-right, a claim made even more striking by assertions such as the one that “the social ontology of the far-right is based upon a racialization of the social” (p. 71). While undeniably central for some far-right permutations, race was virtually absent in others and hardly identifiable in a reliable manner as a nucleus of the “racialized social and political ontology” (p. 72) of the far-right. With the conceptual scaffolding in place, the narrative approaches the foundational mid-19th century as a nascent point and a time of intertwinements between conservative and far-right threads. The 1848 eruption is interpreted as a moment of upscaled balances, of revolutionary fervour allowing the rise of “an embryonic European working class,” a rearrangement of the major class forces in modern politics and an emergence of the far-right, per Marx’s formula, as “a ‘reserve army’ for capital against workers’ power” (p. 93).

A descriptive section broadly outlines the *ancien regime*, advancing from the correct premise that the far-right was shaped by pre-existing forces, namely the ultraconservative counterrevolutionary ethos which suppressed the deluge of the French Revolution. The archetypal model of Bonapartism constructed it as a brand of populism meant to reconcile societal contradictions, cynically exploiting divisions within the ruling elite and galvanizing frail mass support, in a “combination of political opportunism, authoritarianism, imperialism and militarism” (p. 112) that could not quell public turmoil or ensure functional rule. Hence the fatal republican crisis and the authoritarian course of the Second Empire, however limited in scope it might have been compared to future fascisms. Still, Saul distinguishes the historical significance of the Bonapartist statal architecture in it being “the first exemplar of the process through which a far-right regime came to power and the specific political character of a far-right form of state” (p. 115), a “generic far-right” (p. 116) moulded by an objective political crisis and by a pervasive anxiety concerning the revolutionary left. Again, class defines perception, leaving too little space

for ideological insights. Differences between Bonapartism and fascism, beyond obvious contextual determinants, are reduced merely to the degree of para-political instrumentalization. Conversely, analogous traits are overstated: the “state above society” myth, the political support of the *déclassé*, the charismatic populism of the leader.

The political surge of the far-right at the *fin de siècle* is regarded as a legacy of the *ancien régime*, in a continental confrontation engaging two avatars of the right: an establishment force “anchored in the state and part of the ruling class,” versus a lower “mass politics” challenger rising against traditional elites (p. 123). Race is still deemed central in late modernity, from state consolidation and capitalist development to the enforcement of social order and the rise of imperialism, converging towards a “racialization of politics” (p. 137) at the heart of Western political cultures. With the amplified circulation of anti-Semitic tropes, the influence of the racial mindset is undeniable, as it shaped perceptions concerning socialism through a conspiratorial prism, notoriously illustrated by the Dreyfuss Affair or the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Moreover, the ruling segments for which racial hierarchies required “colonial exploitation and maintenance of Empire” shared an anti-black sentiment (p. 140). Social Darwinism, with its pseudoscientific articulations, is integrated into this overarching framework as a sui-generis type of “class racism bemoaning a degeneracy of racial stock,” informing eugenic worldviews (p. 141) and keeping the flame of militaristic colonialism burning.

On a national level, the course of the far-right is scrutinized beginning with Germany, which reveals the previously mentioned shift between the top-down, hierarchical right of the *Kaiserreich* and the bottom-up *völkisch* leagues proliferating across the state, engaged in competition over social representation and power structures on a mutating background of capitalist industrialization and global market expansion. Predictably, structural explanations fall on social lines, with the elite “agrarian industrial bloc” gaining popular support via a “social imperialism,” as already theorized by Eley. Moving on to France, structural similarities are detected in the far-right mobilization of the middle class, the anti-Semitic infestation of nationalism and the looming shadow of empire in the collective imagination. However, a “much more anti-state or anti-regime” far-right emerges here, one prone to extra-parliamentarian violence, drawing on the antirepublican ethos of the “the syndicalist and revolutionary (or Jacobin) traditions” (p. 171) of the long 19th century. Uncompromisingly monarchist and Catholic currents aggregate in the Action Française, speculating the visible fragilities of the Third Republic, while populist iterations such as Boulangism lay the foundations of far-right malignancies, coagulating nationalist protectionism, charismatic populism, authoritarian militarism, anti-liberalism and anti-democratic mindsets into an explosive mixture. Last but not least, in Britain the endemic far-right finds its growth constrained, with radical currents absorbed by traditional party structures, although the outward projection of the British political economy ended up consolidating external native permutations of the far-right. As opposed to continental realities, here traditional social targets of the far-right are shown to have been assimilated by the “liberal hegemonic/historic bloc” and its omnipresent economic ensemble (p. 201).

As the narrative advances towards the inter-war era, fascism is examined “as ideology, politics and state form” (p. 211), the ultimate concentration of technological forces, the

quintessential massification project, the speculator of the crisis of capitalism, the visceral embodiment of “racialized nationalism” and ultimately, in a limited admission of the heuristic utility of fascist studies, as the “revolution of the right” in the sense theorised by Griffin. However, the latter is not an avenue followed too far, since the limitative class explanation returns, with inextricable connections distinguished between fascism and capitalism in indirect reiterations of the notorious mantra of Horkheimer. Sophisticated inquiries extracted from fascist studies, such as those concerning chronopolitics, are inflexibly simplified, as proven by the comprehension of fascist temporality through Bloch’s outdated argument of a “reactionary idealization of a past [...] grafted onto a future-oriented politics’ (p. 214). Saull subsequently evokes the international metamorphoses which facilitated the birth of fascism: World War I as a cataclysmic collapse of capitalism, the cultural-aesthetic shifts deriving from it, ‘the ideological imaginary of socialism’ (p. 222) amplified by the Russian Civil War, the rampant paramilitarism across the continent and so on. There were also the fiscal dependencies to the reconfigured capitalism arising out of Versailles, which for countries such as Germany further undermined class structures and amplified material divisions. Hence, fascism is said to have emerged as “a concomitant ideo-political current of a capitalist imperialism structured around the productive unit of monopoly capital combined with the newly created social and political pathologies of militarized nationalism and anti-communism” (p. 231).

The case study of Italian fascism again draws from the well of canonical Marxism – from Gramsci’s placement of Italy on the periphery of capitalism to Poulantzas’s understanding of fascism as an endemic reaction to the malfunctions of the “imperial system of production.” The scene had been ominously set in the antebellum, with economic protectionism and the authoritarian inclinations of elites, the failed colonial ventures, the ascent of political socialism posing a revolutionary threat, then culminating with war as the ultimate intensifier of inner divisions. Tensions overflowed in the aftermath of the conflict, with the occupation of Fiume becoming an international scandal, the *biennio rosso* rendering the state ungovernable and vicious riots in the rural areas pitting agrarian leagues against capitalist landownership. Fascism’s rise to power is framed, in classical Gramscian terms, as passive revolution, an instance of subsiding revolutionary forces channelled into a political conquest engaging a massified party structure, reconfiguring the shape of the state, but not altering the structural pillars of the social order.

In Germany, the rise of the NSDAP is paralleled to its Italian counterpart, particularly with regards to social base, organizational structure, charismatic leader, violent acts and “contradictory ideological dynamics” (p. 249). Here too revolutionary spectres dominated following the war, bringing dramatic transformations – from the failed November Revolution to the reactive proliferation of the Freikorps –, only to end up crushed due to its splintered nature. Nevertheless, it is Weimar’s financial pitfalls, particularly the daunting war reparations, that led to the undoing of the republic. Following its own unsteady course, the development of National-Socialism is inextricably connected to the Great Depression, a reductionist perspective already reworked in fascist studies. Nonetheless, there was a truly systemic shift towards the far-right, “as the key social and political pillars of the Republic began to weaken” (p. 269) and the final republican governments (Brüning, Papen, Schleicher) dispensed with legality, laying the

foundations of authoritarianism. Germany is subject to Gramscian conceptualization as well, as the context of an “organic crisis” resulting from the “long-term contradictions of [...] uneven and combined development” (p. 274).

Viewed broadly through the social lens, what fascist Italy and Germany both demonstrate, the author claims, is the far-right’s social expansion from traditional petty bourgeoisie to workers and rural segments. It is a widening of scope powered by the crisis dynamic, facilitating the accumulation of political capital “from *within* liberal democracy” (p. 282). It is conceded that fascism manifested itself as “a revolutionary *form* of politics,” yet, following Poulantzas, both major fascisms “remained within the *genus* of the capitalist state and its political economy” (p. 287). Moreover, in examining the political economy of fascism in peacetime and wartime, the narrative registers a particular “materialist ontology of the social world” (p. 292), rooted in the idiosyncratic intellectual tradition of Sorel, Pareto and Spengler among others. From it derives the primacy of the “national popular will,” implying the transcendence of market capitalism and democratic parliamentarism through a “hierarchical and racialized ontology of the social world” (p. 292), shaped in decisive fashion by war and, in another vulnerable argumentative instance, by the whims of the charismatic leader. Other registered traits of the fascist economic typology include the destruction of organized labour, the neglect of the petty bourgeoisie, corporatist endeavours of little practical performance, the success of employment policies as derivative from the militarization of economies in the rearmament process (one of the few valid remarks at this level) and so on. Last but not least, in the realm of political economy as much as in any other, conditionalities of the international scene are shown to have a decisive influence on fascist courses.

Towards the conclusion of the volume, the analysis approaches the stance of the liberal order with regard to the ascent of the inter-war far-right, highlighting a presumed connivance brought about by fierce anti-Bolshevik sentiment, hostility towards the Soviet state and even lucrative trade investments, financial schemes, imports and exports, capital exchanges between the United States and United Kingdom, on the one hand, and Nazi Germany, on the other, providing clearer context to the politics of appeasement. Drawing all these disparate lines to a close, the author reiterates the notion that fascism arose in a climate of “unevenness and combination” involving, in simultaneity and superposition, “the spectre of revolutionary crisis, hyper-nationalism, militarism and the vulnerabilities of liberal democracy” (p. 346). As for fascism’s dark historical and intellectual legacy, looming large over the rest of the century and distinguished, in mutated forms, in contemporaneous settings, it is the task of Saull’s second volume to diligently follow the trajectory of the far-right to our times.

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