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AT FIRST GLANCE

Fascists, Hustlers & Dupes

Irving Howe

Does anyone remember Jacques Doriot? During the 1930s he was a leader of the French Communist party who drifted into fascism. Exploiting his gifts for demagogic oratory, he became a prominent collaborator with the Nazis in the Second World War.

Lyndon LaRouche, also a former leftist gifted at demagogic oratory, has recently been getting a lot of publicity because two of his followers (one of them a self-declared reincarnation of Joan of Arc) won nominations in the Illinois Democratic primary. LaRouche began his political career as a Trotskyist and then steered his little sect—already noted for its large component of kookiness and its indulgence in violence—into or near the New Left. Whether he will descend as deeply into the pits of fascism as Doriot did, we cannot say with certainty; but he has already taken several steps along the Doriot way.

There are differences, of course. It's hard to imagine any of the lumpens whom Doriot assembled being quite as skillful as the well-educated, often professional, and yuppieish followers of LaRouche apparently are at hustling financial contributors, using credit cards to beat the phone system, and sucking corporate executives into buying their slick Executive Intelligence Review for its supposed "inside dope" about international politics and finance. These are decidedly American skills, of a kind the Herman Melville who wrote The Confidence Man would have appreciated. But some aspects of the LaRouche phenomenon do bear a distinctly fascist flavor, and it's worth stopping for just a moment to see how American crankism and cultism can blend with fascist themes and styles.

Whether on the left or right or just in paranolaville, LaRouche has maintained the same tight organizational structure. Dissidents who might have doubted that the Queen of England was running an international drug ring, or Henry Kissinger was really in cahoots with Soviet secret police, or even that American national security required Jane Fonda to be fed to the whales, quickly found themselves out on the street. The methods of the "vanguard party" that LaRouche first picked up in the Trotskyist Socialist Workers party were refashioned to his own cultish, authoritarian ends; but the fundamental structure, a copy or parody of the vanguard, remained. Just as the European fascist movements mimicked the organizational methods of the Bolsheviks, creating a tight inner core and then a series of sympathizing groups spread out in concentric circles, so the LaRouche organization focused on the authority—the inspired Word—of the leader who knows everything from the fine points of metaphysics to the secrets of espionage. In America such highly disciplined structures have been known only within the Marxist-Leninist and Stalinist movements—also some religious sects, as at Jonestown. But most native fascist groups have not, to my knowledge, tried to impose this order of discipline. To do that, one needs the ideological flim-flam of a LaRouche; and in part, at least, this is a heritage from his days as a Trotskyist when he learned something about the peculiar powers of ideology, or a scrappy American simulacrum.

Again like the Bolshevik movement, which it copies or parodies, the LaRouche group offers its followers the deeply comforting sensation of being "in the know" about almost everything. Drugs? Leibniz? Perfidious Albion? B'nai B'rith? Donald Regan? Beethoven? Liberals? Kissinger? The Queen? Ask LaRouche, he'll tell you. And his educated or half-educated followers, many of them college graduates, take pleasure in submitting to his knowledge.

Which tells us something important about modern culture: that, through our universities and mass media, we can produce considerable numbers of people able to talk in a sophisticated manner about
Picasso, Lord Keynes, Freud, Marx, Stravinsky, etc., but quite lacking in those critical skills and traits of independence that mark a serious intellectual or genuinely educated person.

It is a special characteristic of authoritarian cults such as the one LaRouche has built up that they bind their followers not only through illusions of confidential and esoteric knowledge, but, perhaps still more, through wild claims of conspiracy such as any sensible person must immediately recognize as preposterous. But these claims are essential to the cult, since it is through them that the leader “tests” the followers, binding them in a circle of fantasy, delusion, and deceit. The followers will be ready to repeat the line without necessarily believing, even if it runs up against plausibility and the evidence of the senses.

(In a piece about LaRouche [Dissent, Fall 1980] that wildly overestimated his intellectual capacities, Lionel Abel did make a shrewd observation: “How many of LaRouche’s people really think Kissinger an agent of the British... David Hume a creature of the British intelligence service, Ernest Nagel a tool of the CIA, the Reverend Jesse Jackson a ‘poverty pimp’? These accusations are, of course, not believed. They are not really disbelieved either; they are enjoyed.”)

Again, there is a new twist. The LaRouche group features a quotient of “highbrow” talk, garbled half-knowledge for garbled half-intellectuals. If the Doriot gang in France seldom troubled itself with such refinements, there were European fascist movements that made some appeals—successfully, also—to intellectuals and quasi-intellectuals. In America, however, there is behind LaRouche a rich tradition of village cranks, one-plank crusaders, political and religious fundamentalists. But in the age of higher education this tradition has to be “modernized,” so the leader provides his followers with a smattering of high thought.

After the Illinois primary, LaRouche appeared on television. Pumped up with a simulated passion and calculatedly aggressive, he offered a curious mixture of themes. Part of what he said made sense: the economic recovery is inadequate, farmers are in distress, some banks are shaky, and most ordinary politicians prefer to ignore such realities. (But it’s always been characteristic of fascist spokesmen to point at real problems and griefs, even to appropriate part of the left’s criticism.) After this came LaRouche’s program—a farrago of irrelevancies, ranging from “assaults” on the drug rings to proposals that every American be examined for AIDS. (The interview I heard didn’t have anything about going back to the gold standard, another LaRouche nostrum.)

Shifting smoothly from a description of social ills to a wildly irrelevant exploitation of social prejudices is the hallmark of a demagogue, whether he is leader of a native American cult, a full-fledged fascist, or a combination of the two.

What ought to be troubling thoughtful people about the victory of the two LaRoucheites in Illinois is not so much the fact itself as the political-social circumstances that made it possible. In all of Chicago the LaRouche group is said to have 30 members—all right, multiply by 10 and give them 300. How pervasive—and alarming—is the apathy of the population at large and the demoralization of the Democratic party and its partisans in particular, that this wretched sect could grab two major nominations. If the dominant view in the Democratic party is that the best way to confront Reagan is not to confront him, then the path has been cleared for cults, hustlers, and dupes.

I don’t see any large-scale fascist movement arising in the United States in our present circumstances. But the listlessness of our political life constitutes an atmosphere in which even the ugliest weeds can flourish.