

H-France Review Vol. 11 (November 2011), No. 244

Mark Antliff, *Avant-Garde Fascism: The Mobilization of Myth, Art, and Culture in France, 1909-1939*. Durham, N.C., and London: Duke University Press, 2007. xi + 352 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$23.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-8223-4034-8. \$84.95 U.S. (cl). 978 0-8223-4015-7.

Review by Charles Rearick, University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

Avant-Garde Fascism puts a spotlight on theories of aesthetics and revolution that some anti-capitalist, anti-democratic intellectuals propounded in France from 1909 to 1939. The fountainhead of those theories was the writing of Georges Sorel, the anarcho-syndicalist who shifted his hopes to the ultra-royalist, anti-Semitic, and Catholic right (the Action Française in particular) around 1909. Mark Antliff does not label Sorel a “fascist,” but he does apply that term to three followers of Sorel who are the subjects of the book’s last three chapters: Georges Valois, founder of a fascist league he named the Faisceau (1925-1928) and proponent of the utopian project, *la cité française*; Philippe Lamour, founder of the Parti Fasciste Révolutionnaire (1928) and two journals; and Thierry Maulnier, royalist journalist and theorist of classical violence and classicist aesthetics.

Antliff’s main objective is to highlight their discourse on the visual arts—notably painting, sculpture, architecture, and film. The result is a study akin to what David Carroll has done for “literary fascism.”[1] In treating the long-running debates about fascism in France, Antliff builds on Zeev Sternhell’s accounts of the ideology’s leftist origins pre-1914 and Roger Griffin’s generic definition (p. 22)—“a palingenetic form of populist ultranationalism.”[2]

Sorel and his followers all began their intellectual odysseys with a sense of revulsion against the politics, economic system, and culture of Third-Republic France. They condemned the whole as dysfunctional and intolerable, hopelessly mired in injustice and corruption. Decadence was pervasive. Regeneration was imperative, and revolution was the way to achieve it. But on the questions of how revolution could be accomplished and what the remade society would look like, the Sorelians diverged greatly, as each of the theorists worked out significant variations on the master’s ideas. They also revised their ideologies over time in response to changing circumstances around them—in particular the Great War, the Depression, the rise of Hitler to power, and the Popular Front. As the author notes in a striking understatement well into the book, fascism was “not a fixed, stable entity”; it was “a movement full of internal contradictions” (p. 60).

Sorel’s theory of creativity, the author shows, opened the door wide to new affirmations of old prejudice—anti-Semitism in particular—and new myth-making. Embracing the Bergsonian notion of intuition, Sorel’s heirs targeted rationalism as the prime source of degeneration in France. The desiccating mindset stemming from the Enlightenment, they held, brought on general decadence in society and the arts. Abstract universalist thinking about the “citizen” resulted in the destruction of vital identities (occupational, social, regional, religious, ethnic) and community. The prime agents of that destruction, according to Sorel and his colleague Édouard Berth, were the secular, rootless Jewish intellectual and the unproductive Jewish capitalist.

Regeneration would come with the introduction of a corporatist, syndicalist reorganization of state and society, ending divisiveness, maximizing productivity, and strengthening the nation overall—in short, the basic program common to fascists throughout Europe. The Sorelians evoked the new order with blithe hope and unequivocal assuredness, proclaiming that it would bring a happy resolution of republican France's most vexing problems and failings. Whether cast as modernizing or traditionalist or somehow both, the new order would reconcile individualism and collectivism, nationalism and socialism.

The Sorelians were particularly taken with two of Sorel's concepts: the notions of myth for mobilizing the masses and the beauty of violence. The first set off a search for exciting images that would rouse the masses to battle the plutocratic powerful and to overthrow democracy and capitalism. Joining Sorel's instrumental view of myth with William James's philosophy of pragmatism, the theorists rummaged through history for models of heroic action that might work to bring on revolutionary upheaval. They came up with a variety of exemplars—from ancient Homeric warriors and early Catholic martyrs to France's citizen-soldiers of the Great War. While violence appealed to Sorel and company as a detonator of revolution, it also seemed edgy enough that they spilled lots of ink explaining what they meant and putting strong qualifiers in place: not messy physical violence, but the representation of *beautiful* violence; not brutal force, but ethical, disciplined force; not mean, barbaric violence like that of Mussolini's and Hitler's thugs, but *classical* violence (Maulnier's phrase describing a creative dynamic—Apollonian yet Dionysian—that he found in such French masterworks as Racine's tragic dramas).

Antliff's principal thesis is that aesthetic theories played a “central role” in the “development of fascism in France” (pp. 1-2). That should be understood to mean the “development of fascist *theory*” in France—or better yet: fascist *theories*. From the first to last chapter, the author presents the theorists' arguments point by point, taking up one journal article or book after another. He also shows in example after example that fascist ideology was not at all categorically hostile to modernism in art and aesthetics, but was quite compatible in many cases. Aligned with fascist visions of society were works by such modernist artists as Maurice Denis, Aristide Maillol, and Maurice Vlaminck. Le Corbusier's urbanist planning ideas from the 1920s also fit with the fascists' thinking (Valois' in particular), as did Auguste Perret's architectural work in the 1930s. On the broader subject of “reactionary modernism” in French art, fascist or not, Romy Golan's *Modernity and Nostalgia: Art and Politics in France Between the Wars* provides important background to Antliff's study, for it offers a wider view of right-wing cultural politics and a closer examination of pertinent works of art.[3]

It would have been helpful if the author had added more evaluative commentary to the close reading of Sorelian texts, making it clear which articles and points mattered most—as most insightful, influential, or widely resonant. The history recounted might also be more engaging and informative if it told us more about the fascists' activities besides their ideological writing—what they did to finance and publish their small, usually ephemeral journals, for example. Worthwhile, too, would be some recounting of what the fascist organizers did to translate the theories into the images and words used and heard in speeches, rallies, and demonstrations.

But, to return to the book that the author has actually written, I reiterate that he has chosen to concentrate on theory. He has meticulously reconstructed Sorelian currents of thought through the interwar years. His stated reason is to show that fascism in France was not just opportunist praxis, but also serious theorizing, particularly about art and culture. Along the way *Avant-Garde Fascism* points out related artistic works and their parallels in Fascist Italy and Germany, but above all it tells of French ideas, unfolding point-counterpoint, in the decades before France's anti-democratic nationalists found themselves in a Nazi-dominated Europe.

NOTES

[1] David Carroll, *French Literary Fascism: Nationalism, Anti-Semitism and the Ideology of Culture* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995).

[2] Zeev Sternell, *Ni droite, ni gauche l'idéologie: fasciste en France* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1983); Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991).

[3] Romy Golan, *Modernity and Nostalgia: Art and Politics in France Between the Wars* (New Haven, Conn., and London: Yale University Press, 1995).

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ISSN 1553-9172