

ISHAY LANDA, *Fascism and the Masses: The Revolt Against the Last Humans, 1848-1945* (New York: Routledge, 2018)

---

An Israeli researcher with an extensive background in the study of political ideologies, mostly interested in the intellectual developments of liberalism, Marxism and fascism, Ishay Landa attempts, throughout his latest book, to deconstruct the commonplace projection that fascism was a phenomenon of mass society. Instead, *Fascism and the Masses: The Revolt Against the Last Humans, 1848-1945* seeks to prove a contrary thesis, framing fascism as a “de-massifying force,” profoundly elitist in nature and fully hostile to mass culture.

The purportedly self-evident claim according to which generic fascism, and National-Socialism in particular, were expressions of a vulgar, amorphous, submissive, overflowing mass, a thesis advanced by various authors in social sciences, cultural studies, literature and philosophy (such as Mosse, Arendt, Broch, Sternhell or Sloterdijk) is one that Landa openly counters. Quite the opposite, he argues, the relationship between fascism and the masses was “a remarkable transubstantiation of a movement which, across Europe, understood and presented itself as a militant rejection of the ideal of mass politics” (p. 6), with the ultimate aim to deliver the nation from the liberal democratic or socialist order of “mass predominance.” Thus, an operative distinction is highlighted in the thought of Hitler, Mussolini and others between *masses* and *people*, a compelling argument to a limited extent, even though the contradictory balance of populism and elitism in the fascist *Weltanschauung* ought not necessarily be broken in favour of either component of the dichotomy. The nationalization of the masses is correctly assessed as more than a mere restoration to a *status quo ante*, striving towards an existential metamorphosis; less convincing, however, is the alleged class character of fascism discerned in its disdain for the masses, assigned to an ambiguously defined “fascist political unconscious” (p. 18). Still, there is certainly truth to the observation that fascist historiography has focused excessively on populism and paid insufficient attention to elitism, hence the author’s invitation to take fascists at their word when it comes to the masses, namely the enmity towards them. From here derives the interpretation of fascism, through the prism of Nietzschean philosophy, as a phenomenon bent on overthrowing “the underserved and unnatural position of social supremacy” (p. 20) gained by the “Last Humans”. Based on these clearly delineated premises, fascism is loosely defined by Landa as “counter-hegemonic,” rising against the imposition of the masses as the social and cultural hegemon of modernity.

The first chapter builds upon these analytic foundations by providing an introductory incursion into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, tracing the origins of mass society in the transformative context of Western modernity, with the regressive “triumph of the masses” deplored by Nietzsche regarded as an all-encompassing project, “politically

democratic and economically and culturally egalitarian.” A brief overview covers the interpretations on the nature of the masses in modern thought, from Pareto, Mosca and Michels to the critique of the Frankfurt School. What follows is a succinct enumeration of the defining features of mass society as a nexus of profound developments. In the political field, the role of commoners is shown to have increased in the aftermath of the French Revolution, with the ascent of the predominant notion that the government must represent the people, the instatement of the universal franchise in Western countries, the formation of parties with a broad popular base, the extended social agenda of governments and so on. In the demographic sphere, massive population growth and urbanization are correlated with the gains of the industrial revolution, a significant increase in life expectancy etc. In the social and cultural plains, the emergence of trade unions and the rise of syndicalism as a social force with political leverage (ardently encouraged by the likes of Sorel) is contemplated in the context of the transformation of gender roles, the expansion of mass accessible culture (*popular culture* as a commercialized version of the cultural field addressed to common folk), the mass production of goods (Fordism), the “illusion of realism” reinforced through cinematography etc.

Closely following the aforementioned categorization, the thematically similar second chapter is devoted to the forces opposed to massification in its political, demographic, social and cultural forms. Politically, the resistance against democracy was channelled against it as a system which granted quantitative superiority to the “cultural, spiritual, and intellectual inferiority” (p. 64) of the masses, as denounced by several political philosophers who announced the twilight of civilization and dawn of anarchy, irrationality and recklessness. In some national polities, these ideas proliferated on the background of flawed liberal regimes characterized by an „imperfect nationalization” of the masses (such as pre-war Italy, where the disenfranchised and marginalized masses were disillusioned). Demographically, a deep sense of anxiety and frustration was fuelled by the threat felt by certain social segments (the upper classes, the nobility, the bourgeoisie) concerning the alarming tendencies of population growth and urbanization, the fear of a “political-demographic vicious cycle” (p. 89) that would fatefully bring on a reign of the masses. Among the relevant intellectual strands highlighted to that extent are the “parasitism” of the masses deeply engrained in Nietzschean thought, the ascension of social Darwinism coupled with the rise of atheism (turning evolutionism into a surrogate religion), Galton’s eugenic laws of natural selection, as well as Lombroso’s phenomenological “biologization of crime”. Landa problematically outlines these developments as not being intrinsically objective, but instead emerging as „reflections of reality through a class prism” (p. 108). Socially and culturally, the severe problems posed from an elitist standpoint by the emancipation of labour (such as the threat of the masses emphasized by LeBon as quantitatively superior, conscious, organized) led to elitist protest opposing the transformation of

the times, such as the changing role of women. Aesthetic elitism counterposed democratic generalizations, as democratic anarchy was perceived to confront the established order of bourgeois or aristocratic tradition.

Delving into the examination of the dynamics of fascism and mass politics, the third chapter opens with the role of World War I as a vital “precondition of fascism”, actively embraced by Mussolini and Hitler as part of a general “mass enthusiasm” towards the conflict, regarded by most people as a potentially unifying force meant to overcome internal tensions in a so-called “longing for a redemptive war” (p. 146). Naturally, the catastrophic results of the war’s aftermath were quite opposite, causing internal strife and deep ideological, political and social fractures. From a political angle, the “anti-mass nature of fascism” is regarded by Landa as a fact, a phenomenon which, among others, “put a stop to successive and significant empowerment of workers’ parties and unions” (p. 153). Relevant examples are identified in Italy, where the fasces pushed back against democratic parties and trade unions, seeking to subdue the masses through corporatism, as well as Germany, where the rejection of the Weimar Republic as allegedly controlled by Marxist circles hostile to the nation propelled the NSDAP in its desire to “hyper-nationalize” the forces of the centre and right opposed to the mass structures of the left. In analysing the German case, the author comes to the highly controversial conclusion that the *Volksgemeinschaft* was a “sworn enemy” of the unleashed masses, a hypothesis argued via electoral statistics, yet insufficiently proven, especially since little attention is paid to ideological concerns. The notion that fascism perceived itself as ultimately democratic is correctly repudiated, since fascists definitely presented themselves as anti-democratic and were merely duplicitous when claiming otherwise; however, this particular line of argument comes across as superfluous, going to very far lengths in an attempt to prove the rather self-evident point that fascism was not democratic.

The issue of fascism and mass society takes the theoretical approach further in the following chapters, which connect mass society and culture, informed by views articulated in the works of Arendt or Mosse, who focused on “popular culture” instead of the elite intellectual production, or Klaus Mann, for whom National-Socialism drew a collision course between culture and barbarism, a mutiny fuelled by an inferiority complex targeting a high culture. In the exploration of the self-representation of fascism as raising the “banner of art and culture” (p. 233), the analysis explores the function of avant-gardist strands of fascist thought, such as Italian Futurism, with its preoccupation for genius, art and heroism, for the creation of a “neo-aristocracy” of “overmen”, suppressing the bourgeois order and accelerating the nationalization of the masses. The historical narrative further tackles the National-Socialist infatuation with artistic creation as a contestation of mass culture against the democratizing tendencies of culture (referencing the theories of Walter Benjamin). These manifestations, however, did not impede the

development of commercial “mass culture” (cinema, music, literature) neither in Fascist Italy, nor in National-Socialist Germany, a noteworthy observation regarding the conflation of intent and propaganda again informed by the cultural production of the Frankfurt School – Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse –, for whom cultural industry was “intrinsically serviceable to repressive politics” (p. 246), be it capitalist or fascist. Landa argues that the “objective dimension” of fascist mass consumption was significantly lowered under fascist regimes, as canonical historiography has proven time and again, while the „subjective dimension” of consumerism expanded, fuelled by the popular conviction that autocratic regimes were able to successfully provide consumer goods. In Nietzschean tradition, fascism indeed rejected the “massified, peaceful, egalitarian” consumer model with contempt, while adopting an alternative and purportedly superior one based on “violence, plunder and war” (p. 297). The significance of *Kraft durch Freude* and *Dopolavoro* is subsequently explored, not so much in light of an “accommodation to consumerist motifs,” but concerning a homogenizing instrumentalization of the national community meant to divert them from consumption, opening yet another fruitful interpretive avenue. Finally, the antagonism between fascism and the loosely defined concept of “Americanism”, equated in fascist thought to cultural philistinism and ascribed as a malign counterpart to Communist USSR, is explored through the lens of massification.

The final chapters approach two significant stances of alterity, namely the perceptions of gender and Jewish identity in the fascist worldview. Firstly, dealing with the fascist stance on womanhood, Landa highlights the association of the revolt of the masses and the revolt of women, registered as an incentive for the reinforcement of the masculine elite. Thus, the authoritarian and conservative stride of fascism towards women, with its transparent misogyny, blatantly discontinued women’s emancipation and pursued the rehabilitation of stark virility, a purpose accurately equated with the sexualization of politics. Through this prism, women were assigned a vital public role in society, as home-makers and bearers of offspring, a function implicitly defining them as “servants of the national familial cause” (p. 341). As far as the fascist hatred for Jews is concerned, antisemitic enmity is decoded in the general framework of fascist opposition towards the masses. The cultural code of antisemitism is then divided into several facets. Firstly, regarding Jewish identity and capitalism, National-Socialism is correctly perceived as intending to “purify” capitalism by distinguishing between its “creative” and “rapacious” sides (G. Strasser, G. Feder and others), the latter associated with Jewishness. Secondly, concerning Jewish identity and revolution, National-Socialism defined the Jew as an exponent of social discontent par excellence, a generic threat to order. Hitler’s antisemitism in particular is traced as harking back to the symbiotic association of Jewishness and socialism, the impetus to exterminate Marxism by neutralizing the Jews being singled out as the root of the annihilationist endeavour of the Third Reich. Finally, positioning Jewish identity within the dichotomy of mass and elite,

National-Socialism is said to have assigned the Jewish phenomenon to the masses, be they reformist and democratic or insurrectionary and socialist, purportedly spearheading mass culture through the press, yet concomitantly perverting high culture.

With the epilogue weaving these lines of argument into their conclusive thread by evoking the thought of Nietzsche as a nexus of radical modern thought, the author anticipates criticism from “the ranks of left-wing and liberal Nietzscheans,” consecutively addressing common tropes and misconceptions pertaining to the legacy of the German philosopher, either as a critic of capitalism, a forerunner of Critical Theory, or an ideological opponent of fascism. The frequent references of Landa’s remarks to contemporary populist trends clearly indicate, as did both his heuristically valuable assessments and his more debatable theses, that the history of radicalism is perpetually relevant and prone to much needed re-evaluation.

*RĂZVAN CIOBANU*

razvan55ciobanu@yahoo.com

DOI: 10.26424/philobib.2021.26.2.18