

Calverton's Fascism

A reply to V. F. Calverton's article, "Democracy vs. Dictatorship" in the current Modern Quarterly

By WILLIAM Z. FOSTER

YOU request that I express my opinion on your article in the present number of the *Modern Quarterly*, which is entitled "Democracy vs. Dictatorship." I consider the article an important one, hence I am submitting my answer through the columns of the *Communist*.

The article in question (likewise your debate with Mumford) bristles with errors, contradictions, and confusion. It is a strange medley of fascist, social-fascist and communist conceptions. Nevertheless, through it runs a pretty definite line. The article is in flat contradiction to the whole body of Marxian principles. It is an essay in fascism, not communism.

I cannot here undertake to combat all the individual mistakes of your article. The most I shall do is to indicate its main trend, its essentially fascist character.

The elementary fascist line of your article is manifest both in your analysis and your conclusions. It follows the familiar fascist theses that (1) the basic weakness of present-day society is not to be found in the fundamental economic contradiction of the capitalist system but in the bourgeois democracy which, with its parliamentarism, individualism, and "civil liberties," permits the existence of the anti-capitalist labor movement and the relative free play of the class struggle, and (2) that the solution of the capitalist crisis is to be found in the establishment of the fascist dictatorship.

The Marxian analysis, on the other hand, correctly points out that the developing capitalist crisis originates in the basic and ineradicable contradiction between the capitalist class monopolizing the means of production and the toiling masses robbed of all means of production, and between the more rapidly expanding capitalist production and the more slowly expanding capitalist markets. This contradiction is developed because the workers, robbed of their surplus value by the capitalists, are denied all opportunities to consume the mountains of commodities which they produce. This results in capitalist "over-production," with periodic economic crises, mass unemployment and starvation, imperialist wars, and growing class struggle. It must finally culminate in the proletarian revolution. This revolution will

abolish the whole capitalist system of private ownership and production for private property and will substitute therefor a system of social ownership and production for social use, thereby liquidating, with the abolition of exploitation, the present contradiction between production and consumption, and at the same time liquidating the class divisions out of which this economic contradiction arises.

But the fascists, being capitalists, will, of course, hear nothing of all this fatal analysis and revolutionary program. The worst that they find wrong with the capitalist system are certain remediable internal maladjustments. Viewing the problem from their intensely nationalistic standpoint, they see the solution of the capitalist crisis in equipping better their particular country for more effective participation in the imperialist struggle for control of the world market. For them to accomplish this they seek to intensify the exploitation of the workers and poor farmers. And to do this it is necessary to smash the labor movement and to strengthen capitalism at its "weakest" spot by abolishing the so-called democracy and setting up in its stead a despotic fascist dictatorship.

Your article dovetails with these elementary fascist conclusions. You do not challenge the economics of capitalism, but accept them. You do not raise the true issue of communism vs. capitalism, but the false issue of dictatorship vs. democracy. Thus, in substance, like the fascists, you deny the validity of the class struggle and blur it over. According to your article, what is wrong is not capitalism as such, but democracy. Your arguments echo the views of Mussolini and Hitler; they are poles apart from those of Marx and Lenin. If persisted in and logically followed up, such views would carry you definitely into the camp of fascism.

You raise the question of dictatorship on principle, as though it were the solution of capitalism's ills. Similarly, you condemn democracy on principle. You say, "Only a dictatorship can so integrate the political and economic factors, and effect the centralization of control, which are necessary to the maintenance of modern industrial life." And further: "The technological efficiency demanded by modern industry can never be adequately attained under democratic controls."

This is fascist. It is anti-communist and flatly contradictory to the Marxian conception. It is a theory of permanent capitalist dictatorship. But communist theory and practice are for the liquidation not only of the capitalist dictatorship by revolution but also of the proletarian dictatorship by the "withering away" of the state after the decisive defeat of the bourgeoisie. Lenin says (*State and Revolution*): "Only in communist society, when the resistance of the

capitalists has been finally broken, when the capitalists have disappeared, when there are no longer any classes—*only then* does the state disappear *and one can speak of freedom*. Only then will be possible and will be realized a really full democracy, a democracy without any exceptions.”

Contrary to your theses, it is only under proletarian democratic controls that modern industry can be adequately organized for modern life. This is exemplified by the living experience in the Soviet Union, where both the integration of industry and democratic controls, which are inextricably bound up with each other, are on an indisputably higher plane than in any other country. Social ownership inevitably involves social control. It is no contradiction that the country that is able to produce the Five-Year Plan has incomparably more genuine democracy than any other land in the world.

You are therefore quite wrong in so gleefully, and in typical fascist fashion, singing the requiem of democracy. While it is true that capitalist “democracy” (which is only a disguised dictatorship) is being discarded by the employers with the development of the world crisis of their system and the sharpening of the class struggle, this does not by any means indicate, as you say, that “the modern world is fast ridding itself of every vestige of democracy.” On the contrary, it is only with the development of the proletarian revolution that real democracy is being born. The *Program of the Communist International* says: “The Soviet form of state, being the highest form of democracy, namely, proletarian democracy, is the very opposite of bourgeois democracy, which is bourgeois dictatorship in a masked form.” You make a basic error in identifying democracy in principle with petty industry and capitalist competition, and in concluding that the rise of great industry and mass production of necessity requires dictatorship and autocracy. This theory is as wrong as your absurd argument that the class struggle only arises with the development of mass production and the reduction of the workers to “robots.” We are not, as you argue, going into “an era of dictatorships” as “the inevitable expression of twentieth century industrial and social life.” But what we are entering is a period of proletarian revolution which will smash the capitalist dictatorships and begin a new epoch of democracy and social advance.

You conceive of the proletarian dictatorship in the vulgar sense of the capitalists. The proletarian dictatorship means democracy within the ranks of the working class, and the suppression of the class enemies of the workers. It results, with the final defeat of the world bourgeoisie, in the establishment of an all-embracing democracy.

The essentially fascist character of your article comes out most

clearly in your quite definite acceptance of fascism as having solved the capitalist crisis in Italy. For one calling himself a Communist, you make the following astounding statement:

“To summarize, then, it is the very structure of modern society, with its disorganized production and division of classes, that makes dictatorship inevitable as the next step in the historic process. The dictatorships can take on one of two characters: Communist or Fascist—oppose private property and establish the dictatorship of the proletariat, or defend private property and establish the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. *In either case industry can be organized into a scientific unit, the present dissipation of economic energy be saved, and the friction of democratic struggle be destroyed.*” (Emphasis mine.—W. Z. F.)

To argue against this statement means to argue against fascism, against the fascist theory that through its dictatorship the ills of capitalism can be cured. Your theory here is the social-fascist conception of organized capitalism, the notion that it is possible, within the framework of the capitalist system, to overcome the basic contradictions of that system. The principal variation in your article is that, despite your communist declarations, you give this theory a more open and frankly fascist character than do the typical social-fascists.

That by the foregoing summary conclusion you actually imply that fascism can overcome capitalism's crisis, fixing the system a bit—in other words, that the proletarian revolution has no economic foundation—you make clear by your systematic lumping together of what is going on in the Soviet Union and fascist Italy. For you, as far as the economics are concerned, both are doing the same thing—eliminating the devastating contradiction between production and distribution. You say:

“While perfect efficiency of this kind could be best achieved by the management of technologists, social controls being as they are the best that can be done is what is being done in both Soviet Russia and Italy today, where technologists are employed by the state to carry out the plans of organization.”

So the proletarian revolution means nothing basic economically. Its new economic-political-social organism is not especially necessary. The problem economically (and thus politically) for capitalism is simply to get the technologists to work and fix up the present system, to organize capitalism. In your debate with Mumford you argue for many long pages, and often very incorrectly, for the necessity of revolution, not reform. But in the face of the fascist conclusions in your article, to which you attach the very greatest importance, all your contentions against Mumford fall to the

ground. They only serve as so many radical phrases to obscure the basically fascist content of your presentation.

So much for the article in question. Now may I say a few words on your group? I do not think it is a healthy one. The social-fascist and liberal elements whom you gathered together to debate Marxism in the columns of the *Modern Quarterly* in no sense represent the revolutionary foment now going on among the intellectuals. They are the defenders of revisionism, of capitalism. They are enemies of the revolution.

That there is a real foment among the intellectuals cannot be denied. Formerly, American intellectuals almost unanimously found an easy berth with capitalism and they were its ardent champions. When they came from the schools in great flocks they became ready parts of the vast imperialist machine. But now it becomes different. The economic crisis bears down upon the intellectuals, in school as well as outside. Many have to face even the bitterness of unemployment. So a foment develops among them. Some of this grows in a revolutionary direction. Its organization and cultivation is important. But you cannot do this, cannot win these budding elements for useful revolutionary work, by such a reactionary group as yours or with such fascist arguments as you make.

