Three New Deals: Reflections on Roosevelt's America, Mussolini's Italy, and Hitler's Germany, 1933–1939

(Wolfgang Schivelbusch)

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This book, a brief work of cultural history, outlines four parallel aspects of three political systems: the American New Deal, Italian Fascism, and German National Socialism. The point of *Three New Deals* is that these political systems shared core similarities in certain programmatic manifestations. The author, Wolfgang Schivelbusch, fortunately does not claim that the three systems were essentially the same. He offers, instead, a discussion of the interplay between the governed and the governors in each of these systems—how each shaped the other, in ways that can be compared and contrasted across systems. The result is a book of modest interest from which, perhaps, something more can be spun.

While cultural history is interesting, my purpose is not to examine *Three New Deals* as a view on the past, but as an onramp to the future. What applicable lessons, what tools, can we learn from this look at the troubled 1930s, when, like now, liberal democracy seemed like a dying system? By lessons, I do not mean pedagogical lessons, helping us to get liberal democracy back on track, since I don't want to get it back on track. I mean how can what worked then to build mass support for political systems be used today to the same effect? Certainly, if the New Deal is not disqualified from polite society by its parallels to true Fascism and to National Socialism, there is no particular reason a fourth, future, polity with the same parallels should be disqualified.

I really need a name for this political program that I am constructing. It is, of course a reactionary program—in my usual phrase, "a new thing informed by the wisdom of the past." Generically, I refer to it as Reaction, but that is neither evocative nor adequately precise. That will not catch fire. In part, the problem is that it's hard to name a program that is not an ideology, but rather a set of principles based on history and human nature, which does not promise utopia, or guarantee happiness or universal justice, but merely offers living within the truth, and maximum possibility for human flourishing. "Restorationism," a

related term, is too backward looking for my purposes; the past is gone, which is a key principle of mine, and anyway not all elements of any past were wholly desirable. I am struggling to come up with something good. Neo-Realism? If you have an idea, let me know.

But let's parse the book. Schivelbusch makes clear his own angle from the book's epigraph, a quote from David Hume: "As force is always on the side of the governed, the governors have nothing to support them but opinion. It is, therefore, on opinion that the government is founded; and this maxim extends to the most despotic and the most military governments as well as to the most free and popular." We can forgive Hume his delusion that force is "always on the side of the governed"; he lived far away from Oriental despotism and long before both the modern totalitarian state and our own Cthulhu state. But his major point is insightful—that public opinion matters to any government. (In addition to public opinion, what he called "opinion of interest," Hume was also talking about legitimacy, or what he called "opinion of right." They are related, but not the same.) One necessary conclusion is that the support of the public is essential for the stability of any government, and its ability to fulfil its program, and the more support, the better. This is, no doubt, why Schivelbusch chose this epigraph, for the rest of his book discusses how public opinion was shaped by the three regimes that are the subject of his study.

The critical importance of public opinion in all times and places isn't news, of course, and has little or nothing to do with democracy. José Ortega y Gasset pointed out that force, even in the modern world, followed public opinion. Julius Caesar and Augustus both were keenly aware of the need to keep public opinion, both aristocratic and plebian, in their corner. Such examples could be multiplied endlessly through the centuries. The trick, therefore, for those in charge is how to shape and shift that public opinion, rather than being tossed about by it. Such an effort is like the martial art of aikido—if you use your opponent's own motions, but redirect them, it is a lot easier to win than by simply trying to overwhelm one force with another. In the same way, it is easier to create channels for public opinion and thereby lead and direct the flow in the desired direction, within the limits set by the opinion itself, which will vary in time and place. How to carve those channels, in four different ways, is the topic of the rest of *Three New Deals*.

Schivelbusch begins with "Leadership." While Roosevelt is now, as viewed through the prism of World War II, seen as the antithesis of Hitler and Mussolini, in the early 1930s all three were perceived as charismatic leaders outside the established system, who stood apart from the traditional ruling class and built a "direct emotional connection with the masses." "Commentators freely noted areas of convergence among the New Deal, Fascism, and National Socialism. All three were considered postliberal state-capitalist or state-socialist systems, more closely related to one another than to classic Anglo-French liberalism. Hitler, Mussolini, and Roosevelt were seen as examples of plebiscite-based leadership: autocrats who came to power via varying but thoroughly legal means."

The mechanisms for, and therefore the impact of, this emotional connection to leadership were different: Hitler used the mass rally, Roosevelt the radio, "yet both were collective experiences." Schivelbusch points out that the perception we have from speech excerpts of Hitler simply ranting is wrong; his speeches started and ended calmly, in a deliberate structure, and were regarded at the time as incredibly effective, just like Roosevelt's "fireside chats"—especially at making the listener feel like he was being directly addressed. Both were carefully constructed and honed for maximum impact by the men who delivered them, who had a gift for oratory. Yes, it's difficult to compare the two, in part because radios were much more common in American homes and, obviously, radio lacked the mass drama created by Hitler's staging and a surrounding crowd (Schivelbusch naturally cites Gustave Le Bon). "Yet in both cases, the end result was similar. The individual abandoned [himself] fully to the speaker. . . . "

So now we have our first necessary element in a modern program: a charismatic leader in the same mold, that is, one having this direct emotional connection with individuals while actually addressing them en masse. Modern exemplars are thin on the ground; no Western modern politician has had any element of this charisma. Barack Obama was puffed as a great orator; we can ignore whether that's actually true, but note without dispute, I think, that charisma does not derive from positive reception by people who already agree with you. I doubt if anybody at all was ever convinced of anything by an Obama speech; his oratory was purely designed for the faithful. And, of course, like all modern politicians, it wasn't his oratory at all—he read, word-for-word,

speeches written for him by others. I'm pretty sure it's impossible to create a "direct emotional connection" that way. Donald Trump may be good at the rabble rousing speech, and he is more extemporaneous, but his speeches are hardly honed, and he is also preaching mostly to the choir. Trump may be charismatic, but he is far too undisciplined to be this type of leader.

Arguably, the rise of such a man is more difficult than in the past, simply because collectively addressing the masses requires them to pay attention, and people have so many different ways to spend their time, and money to satisfy their tastes. This is exacerbated by the atomization of society and the destruction of intermediary institutions, which, for good and bad, can impose pressure on their members to participate collectively. It's not clear to me that in the present dispensation any charismatic leader could get traction—say, approval by eighty-five percent of people. In any case, it seems to me such a man must spring up full grown, like Athena from the head of Zeus. We will not wake up one day with Ted Cruz or Gavin Newsom as Maximum Leader. If such a man does arrive, we will know it—again, for good or bad. For my purposes, therefore, there is nothing to do to hasten this tool for implementation of the program.

Schivelbusch next turns to "Propaganda," "the means by which charismatic leadership, circumventing intermediary social and political institutions like parliaments, parties, and interest groups, gains direct hold upon the masses." As he points out, World War I led to the massive use of extremely aggressive propaganda by the United States government. All successful propagandists, though, start by grasping what public opinion is, along with where it is trending, and then reinforce what are perceived as desirable opinions, or "illuminate the people if those trends lead nowhere," in the words of Joseph Goebbels that Schivelbusch quotes. While the general form of propaganda was similar, the New Deal government, unlike the Third Reich, did not have propaganda directed from a central ministry. Instead, it had coherent propaganda diffused through multiple departments, responding to direction from Roosevelt. And American propaganda relied on cooperation, which it got, from the press, sometimes helped along by pressure, rather than direct coercion, although the Nazis did not often have to use coercion either.

Beyond direct narrative propaganda of the obvious sort, the role of symbols was extremely important. Schivelbusch contrasts the successful Nazi use of symbolism (in part derived from Communist use of symbols) with the insistence upon strict rationality by their Social Democratic opponents. He gives the example of how the SD failed to push the powerful design by Sergei Chakotin of the "Anti-Fascist Circle," three downward pointing arrows. (This symbol is still used by the so-called Antifa. That's a topic beyond today, but it is interesting that Schivelbusch notes the quote attributed to Huey Long, "When America gets Fascism it will call it Anti-Fascism.") Not that Schivelbusch thinks the SD could have won with more skillful propaganda; his claim is that "Propaganda works best in the service of a movement that is already on the rise, and its most effective moment comes in periods of crisis and revolution, when a fading regime is losing its potency and the nation's will is as yet undecided." No doubt Carl Schmitt would have had much to say on this.

One equivalent in New Deal America was the Blue Eagle of the NRA (not the good one, rather the "National Recovery Administration"). This was the central symbol of an extremely aggressive, though relatively brief, campaign by the Roosevelt administration to force "voluntary" price and wage controls, through identifying by display of the symbol those people who were good and those who were bad, and thereby creating a snowball of psychological compulsion. The head of the NRA, Hugh Johnson, called for social ostracism and boycotts of those not participating, though he didn't call it a boycott. Rather, merchants not participating went out of business because "The public simply cannot tolerate non-compliance with their plan." Thus, the Blue Eagle was a classic form of what Schivelbusch calls the "symbolism of compliance." Its equivalent in Germany was the use of "Heil Hitler," display of swastika flags, and so forth. Its equivalent today is "Resist" and "I'm With Her" stickers, yard posters lying that "Hate Has No Home Here," or signs in shop windows saying "Workers of the World, Unite" or "This Business Serves Everybody."

The purpose of all 1930s propaganda, narrative or symbolic, was to create the psychology of "voluntary compulsion." It was not a substitute for actual political programs, which were offered and repeated in detail, but were given punch by symbolism. "What captivated the

public imagination was not any particular project and its chances for success but the emotional charge of how such projects were presented."

So what does this imply for my program? It implies, for one, that modern "movement" conservatives are functionally worthless. (Sorry to my friends in the conservative movement.) Ideas may have consequences, but theirs don't, because the masses aren't listening, and they're not going to wake up one day, realize what they're missing, and rush to consume journals of opinion or YouTube videos with 324 views. The conservative movement does have uses—for example, building Rod Dreher's Benedict Option can be done through such a movement and its publications. By definition, the Benedict Option is not a mass movement (though the government, with the support of the masses, if they are not turned by an angel with a flaming sword, or a man with an AR-15, will crush the Benedict Option, as I have said before and I will shortly expand upon). But good propaganda has exactly zero traction on the intellectual Right today (though "MAGA" does have some pull). It has somewhat more traction on the Left, but, really, not much by historical standards.

Perhaps, in any case, propaganda's effect is lessened today for the same reason that charismatic leaders cannot get the focused attention of the masses, and modern symbols of compliance often feel washed out—there is a lot of competition for eyeballs. I'm not sure what an effective propaganda campaign would look like; the only ones we have today are facile ones that ask of people nothing other than costless virtue signaling. Certainly, such virtue signaling is not costless for others, like orthodox Christian bakers, and such propaganda does have a real impact on the masses, but it seems to me there is little of the visceral, or any "emotional charge," about it. One moment a flash of contempt for the Christian, who dares deny that "Love is Love is Love" is a profound truth; the next moment it is forgotten as Netflix offers a smorgasbord of cotton candy for the brain. For any propaganda to be successful in catching the vast majority of people and pushing them in a particular direction, good symbolism or no, it would have to be tied to some focusing event, jarring people out of their lives of ease and comfort to think for themselves again. If grabbed at that moment, let's say at the same time the charismatic leader seizes the day, then we are well on our way to rerouting public opinion through our new channels.

I will also note in passing, and keep discussion for another day (sorry I keep doing that), that good propaganda requires good creative ability. In the post-war era, creative types tend to be left-wing. Certainly, artists have not historically been left-wing; this is a wholly modern phenomenon, the basis and future of which bear examination. But as I say, not today. I also note that one necessary lesson from this discussion of leadership and propaganda is how rapidly the consensus represented by public opinion can shift. Public opinion is like a counter-weighted elevator; it seems like it would take an enormous effort to shift its direction, but it is so balanced that small changes reverse it entirely, multiplying the impact of both leadership and propaganda.

Up next, Schivelbusch covers "Back to the Land." Nationalism, in the sense of a classless community of the nation; and its cousin, autarky, get a brief treatment. Of course, the community of the nation has its enemies; in America, those were the "money changers" blamed by Roosevelt (not an anti-Semitic reference) and the supposed war profiteers. The governments in all three countries explored forms of regionalism and autarkic back-to-the-soil movements, in part a reaction to economic depression and resulting unemployment in cities, in part a form of re-enchantment and retreat to a supposedly more virtuous, primordial way of life, a type of "organic authenticity." In the United States, this led to a lot of talk, and the construction of the abortive Arthurdale planned community in West Virginia. The Germans also nattered a lot about "settlements" (*Siedlungen*), but those never went much of anywhere inside Germany (still, it seems to me, though Schivelbusch does not mention it, that these same concepts must have underlain the plans for German repopulation of the "new lands to the East," after the inconvenient *Untermenschen* had been seen off). Schivelbusch does not see these "back to the land" movements as a failure, however—he sees them as an integral and successful element of the overall propaganda effort of both the American and German regimes.

My program is not going to have any back-to-the-land component. While there is something to be said for keeping farming as a possible occupation simply for nostalgia, modern agriculture doesn't need family farms, nor does farming offer anything that catches and channels public opinion. Neo-Realism, or whatever we are calling it, will not offer price supports to farmers. It will not allow factory farming, either,

though—allowing fat people to hoover up huge quantities of cheap fried meat is antithetical to human flourishing, and while animals have no rights at all, it is our duty to treat them, to exercise our dominion over them, in a moral fashion, which factory farming does not. But the days of working the soil for any significant portion of the population are over, and there is nothing inherently more virtuous about farming than any other occupation—though, certainly, total detachment from nature is not desirable, so there will be plenty of parks, national and otherwise.

Finally, Schivelbusch turns to "Public Works." Mussolini finally gets some mention (he is mostly missing from the first three topics). Here we return to neoclassical monumentalism, which, let's be honest, impresses everybody. You are lying if you think Le Corbusier holds a candle to, say, the Jefferson Memorial. Classic architecture is classic for a reason. "Scholars gradually recognized neoclassical monumentalism—whether of the 1930s, the Renaissance, the French Revolution, or the Napoleonic empire—for what it is: the architectural style in which the state visually manifests power and authority." In Washington, D.C., "most of the large neoclassical buildings associated with the city today were built between 1933 and 1939." Similar projects were undertaken elsewhere. True, there are limits to this. The monstrous proportions of buildings proposed, but never built, by Hitler and Stalin take this arc too far, becoming anti-human and enshrining the state as a false god (the Amazon series *The Man in the High Castle* portrays many of these buildings as if-built; this reality comes through clearly).

But buildings are only a small part of it; a government desiring to create a new thing must offer a broad range of public works that embody a unifying philosophy and create a unifying effect. Mussolini drained the Pontine Marshes and constructed therein new cities, "three-dimensional representations of the Fascist ideals of organization, control, and the absence of urban chaos." The struggle to tame nature gave Fascism an epic tale that fit with charismatic leadership and propaganda; a masculine battle against disorder. In America, the equivalent, with less bluster but on a grander scale, was projects like the Tennessee Valley Authority (also used to extend the reach of the federal government beyond traditional limits). The Germans had the autobahn.

We don't have any of this now. The only type of neoclassical monumentalism we have is pathetic imitations, like the infamous time Obama

gave a speech in the midst of plywood pillars erected as a pop-up Greek temple. But I'll tell you what—we need a lot more of it. My program will kill two birds with one stone—every ugly government building built since the 1960s will be torn down, and to the extent new ones are needed, neoclassical buildings will go up. (A lot fewer will go up than are torn down, since there will be far fewer government employees, and those that remain will be nearly wholly rusticated, working in Class C office buildings in Topeka. The extra land will be given over to parks, or perhaps public buildings tangential to government, such as libraries, which will also be done in classical style.) Since we will not be exalting government, unlike these 1930s regimes, we will not need giant new halls to act as the focus for our rulers; all new buildings will be actual monuments or open-use, Roman Forum-type constructions. And other public works, in the form of massive infrastructure rebuilding and improvements, that offer jobs, support for the activities of future generations, and beauty, will also abound. All this will reinforce the effects of propaganda and charismatic leadership.

So there you go. I learned a lot useful from this book. That's not to say that the substance of my program is going to have much in common with any of these three regimes. We've learned lots of other things from the past. We can do entirely without the central planning so loved in the 1930s. That's been tried and found wanting, in every area, especially economics, and perhaps except for military action (which does not include innumerable attempts to address the latest frivolous craze as "the moral equivalent of war"). Skipping the racism, the ethnocentrism, and the exaltation of the state are also obvious needed differences. But whatever the specifics of Neo-Realism, it won't sell itself, or if it does, not to enough people, and this book shows how it can be sold, even though I doubt the author intended it as a how-to guide.