

Lovecraft's Politics

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To many of his admirers, the scariest things H. P. Lovecraft wrote were not about Cthulhu, they were about politics. But, as I hope to show, the politics of this master of looming, irrational, metaphysical horror are solidly grounded in reality and reason.

Lovecraft, like many of the literati who turned to Left- or Right-wing politics early in the 20th century, was concerned with the impact of capitalism and technology on society and culture. The economic reductionism of capitalism was simply mirrored by Marxism, both of them emanations of the same modern materialist *Zeitgeist*.

Beginning in the late 19th century, a pervasive discontent with materialism led to a search for an alternative form of society, including alternative foundations for socialism, which occupied Europe's leading socialist minds like Georges Sorel. What emerged early in the 20th Century was variously called "neosocialism" and "planism," the most prominent exponents of which were Marcel Deat in France and Henri De Man in Belgium. Neosocialism, in turn, influenced the rise of fascism.[1]

Neosocialists primarily feared that the material abundance and leisure promised by socialism would lead to decadence and banality unless joined to a hierarchical vision of culture and education.

This was, for instance, the focus of Oscar Wilde's *The Soul of Man under Socialism*, which envisioned an individualistic socialism that liberated humanity from economic necessity to pursue self-actualization and higher cultural and spiritual activities, even if these consisted of nothing more than quietly contemplating the cosmos.[2]

Such concerns cannot be dismissed as effete dandyism. They were shared, for instance, by the famous Depression era New Zealand Labour politician John A. Lee, a one-armed hero of the First World War who more than any other individual tried to pressure the 1935 Labour Government into keeping its election pledges on banking and state credit.[3] In Lee's words:

Joe Savage . . . sees socialism as piles of goods fairly equitably divided and work equitably divided. I am sure he never sees it as the opportunity to play football, get brown on a beach, dance a fox trot, lie on one's back beneath the trees, enjoy the intoxication of verse, the perfume of flowers, the joys of a novel, the thrill of music.[4]

Lee envisioned a form of socialism that was not directed primarily towards "piles of goods and work equitably distributed" as an end in itself, but as the means of achieving higher levels of being.

These neosocialist concerns were also shared by the fascists and National Socialists. Combating the enervating and leveling effects of wealth and leisure, and edifying the characters and tastes of the masses were the goals of *Dopolavoro* in Fascist Italy and Strength Through Joy in National Socialist Germany, as disquieting as this thought may be to socialists of the Left.

While it seems unlikely that Lovecraft was aware of this ideological tumult in European socialism, he arrived at similar conclusions in some key areas.

Lovecraft, like other writers who rejected Marxism,[5] deemed both democracy and communism "fallacious for Western Civilization." [6] Instead, Lovecraft favored:

. . . a kind of fascism which may, whilst helping the dangerous masses at the expense of the needlessly rich, nevertheless preserves the essentials of traditional civilization and leaves political power in the hands of a small and cultivated (though not over-rich) governing class largely hereditary but subject to gradual increase as other individuals rise to its cultural level.[7]

Lovecraft feared that socialism, like capitalism, would pave the way for universal proletarianization and the consequent leveling of culture. Thus he proposed instead full employment and the shortening of the work day through mechanization under the cultural guidance of an aristocratic socialist-fascist regime.

This again was probably a perceptive insight arrived at independently by Lovecraft, but it was very much a part of the new economic thinking of the time. In England, the Fabian-socialist review, *The New Age*, edited by guild-socialist A. R. Orage, became a forum for discussing Maj. C. H. Douglas' "Social Credit" theory, which was proposed as an alternative to the debt finance system, with the issue of a "social credit" to all citizens through a "National Dividend" allowing the full value of production to be consumed. They also aimed at fostering mechanization to decrease work hours and increase leisure, which they thought would be conducive to the blossoming of culture. (These ideas have renewed relevance as the eight-hour workday, the long-fought gain of the early labor movement, is becoming a rarity.)

Both Ezra Pound and New Zealand poet Rex Fairburn were Social Crediters because they judged it the best economic system for the arts and culture.

Lovecraft was concerned at the elimination of the causes of social revolution, and he advocated the limitation of the vast accumulation of wealth, while recognizing the need to maintain wage disparities based on merit. His concern was the elimination of the "commercial oligarchs,"[8] which in practical terms was the purpose of Social Credit and of the neosocialists.

While regarding the primary goal of a nation to be the development of high aesthetic and intellectual standards, Lovecraft recognized that such a society must be based on the traditional social organization of "order, courage and endurance," his definition of civilization being that of a social organism devoted to "a high qualitative goal" maintained by the aforesaid ethos.

Lovecraft thought the hierarchical social order best fitted to the practicalities of the new machine age was a "fascistic one." The "demand-supply motive" would replace the profit motive in a state-directed economy that would reduce working hours while increasing leisure hours. The citizen could then be elevated culturally and intellectually as far as innate abilities allowed, "so that this leisure will be that of a civilized person rather than that of a cinema-haunting, dance-hall frequenting, pool-room loafing clod."

Lovecraft saw no wisdom in universal suffrage. He advocated a type of neo-aristocracy or meritocracy, with voting rights and the holding of public office "highly restricted." A technological, specialized civilization had rendered universal suffrage "a mockery and a jest." He wrote that, "People do not generally have the acumen to run a technological civilization effectively." This anti-democratic principle Lovecraft held to be true regardless of one's social or economic position, whether as menial laborer or as an academic.

The uninformed vote upon which democracy rests, Lovecraft wrote, "is a subject for uproarious cosmic laughter." The universal franchise meant that the unqualified, generally representing some "hidden interest," would assume office on the basis of having "the glibbest tongue" and "the flashiest catch-words."

His reference to "hidden interests" can only refer to his understanding of the oligarchic nature of

democracy. This would have to be replaced by “a rational fascist government,” where office would require a prerequisite test of knowledge on economics, history, sociology and business administration, although everyone—other than unassimilable aliens—would have the opportunity to qualify.[9]

A year after Mussolini took power in 1922 Lovecraft wrote that, “Democracy is a false idol—a mere catchword and illusion of inferior classes, visionaries and dying civilizations.” He saw in Fascist Italy “the sort of authoritative social and political control which alone produce things which make life worth living.”

This was also why Ezra Pound admired Fascist Italy, writing “Mussolini has told his people that poetry is a necessity *to the state*.”[10] And: “I don’t believe any estimate of Mussolini will be valid unless it starts from his passion for construction. Treat him as *artifex* and all the details fall into place. Take him as anything save the artist and you will get muddled with contradictions.”[11]

Such figures as Pound, Marinetti, and Lovecraft viewed fascism as a movement that could successfully subordinate modern technological civilization to high art and culture, freeing the masses from a coarse and brutalizing commoditized popular culture.

Lovecraft thought the cosmos indifferent to mankind and concluded that the only meaning of human existence is to reach ever higher levels of mental and aesthetic development. What Sir Oswald Mosley called actualization to *Higher Forms* in his post-war thinking,[12] and what Nietzsche called the goal of *Higher Man* and the *Overman*,[13] could not be achieved through “the low cultural standards of an underdeveloped majority. Such a civilization of mere working, eating drinking, breeding and vacantly loafing or childishly playing isn’t worth maintaining.” It is a form of lingering death and is particularly painful to the cultural elite.

Lovecraft was heavily influenced by Nietzsche and Oswald Spengler.[14] He recognized the organic, cyclic nature of cultural birth, youthfulness, maturity, senility and death as the basis of the history of the rise and fall of civilizations. Thus the crisis brought to Western Civilization by the machine age was not unique. Lovecraft cites Spengler’s *The Decline of The West* as support for his view that civilization had reached the cycle of “senility.”

Lovecraft saw cultural decline as a slow process that spans 500 to 1000 years. He sought a system that could overcome the cyclical laws of decay, which was also the motivation of Fascism.[15] Lovecraft believed it was possible to re-establish a new “equilibrium” over the course of 50 to 100 years, stating: “There is no need of worrying about civilization so long as the language and the general art tradition survives.” The cultural tradition must be maintained above and beyond economic changes.[16]

In 1915 Lovecraft established his own political journal called *The Conservative*, which ran for 13 issues until 1923. The focus of the journal was defending high cultural standards, particularly in the field of Letters, but it also opposed pacifism, anarchism, and socialism and supported “moderate, healthy militarism” and “Pan-Saxonism,” meaning “the domination of English and kindred races over the lesser divisions of mankind.”[17]

Like the neosocialists in Europe, Lovecraft opposed the materialistic conception of history as being equally bourgeois and Marxist. He saw Communism as “destroying the zest for life” for the sake of a theory.[18] Rejecting economic determinism as the primary motive of history, he saw “natural aristocrats” arising from all sectors of a population regardless of economic status. The aim of a society was to substitute “personal excellence for that of economic position”[19] which is, despite Lovecraft’s declared opposition to “socialism,” nonetheless essentially the same as the “ethical socialism” propounded by Henri De Man, Marcel Deat et al. Lovecraft saw Fascism as the attempt to achieve this form of aristocracy in the context of modern industrial and technological society.

Lovecraft saw the pursuit of “equality” as a destructive rationale for “an atavistic revolt” against

civilization by those who are uneasy with culture. The same motive was the root of Bolshevism, the French Revolution, the “back to nature” cult of Rousseau, and the 18th Century Rationalists. Lovecraft saw that the same revolt was being taken up by “backward races” under the leadership of the Bolsheviks.[20]

These views are clearly Nietzschean, but they even more specifically resemble those of *The Revolt Against Civilization: The Menace of the Underman*[21] by the then popular author Lothrop Stoddard, whose work would certainly have attracted Lovecraft, with his concern for the maintenance and rebirth of civilization and rejection of leveling creeds.

Although Lovecraft rejected egalitarianism, he did not advocate a tyranny that represses the masses for the benefit of the few. Instead, he viewed elite rule as a necessary means for achieving the higher goals of cultural actualization. Lovecraft wished to see the elevation of the greatest number possible.[22] Lovecraft also rejected class divisions as “vicious,” whether emanating from the proletariat or the aristocracy. “Classes are something to be gotten rid of or minimized—not to be officially recognized.” Lovecraft proposed to replace class conflict with an integral state that reflected the “general culture-stream.” Between the individual and the state would exist a two-way loyalty.

Lovecraft regarded pacifism as an “evasion and idealistic hot air.” He declared internationalism “a delusion and a myth.”[23] He saw the League of Nations as “comic opera.”[24] Wars are a constant in history and must be prepared for via universal conscription.[25] Historically war had strengthened the “national fiber,” but mechanized warfare had negated the process; in fact the mass technological destruction of the First World War was widely recognized as dysgenic. Nonetheless the European, and specifically the Anglo-Saxon, must maintain his supremacy through firepower, for “a foeman’s bullet is sweeter than a master’s whip.”[26] However, as one might expect from an anti-materialist, Lovecraft repudiated the typical modern cause of warfare, that of fighting for mercantile supremacy, “defense of one’s own land and race [being] the proper object of armament.”[27]

Lovecraft saw Jewish representation in the arts as responsible for what Francis Parker Yockey would call “culture distortion.” New York City had been “completely Semitized” and lost to the “national fabric.” The Semitic influence in literature, drama, finance, and advertising created an artificial culture and ideology “radically hostile to the virile American attitude.” Like Yockey, Lovecraft saw the Jewish Question as a matter of an “antagonistic culture-tradition” rather than as a difference of race. Thus Jews could theoretically become assimilated into an American cultural tradition. The Negro problem, however, was one of biology and must be recognized by maintaining “an absolute color-line.”[28]

This brief sketch is sufficient, I think, to show that H. P. Lovecraft belongs among an illustrious list of 20th century creative geniuses—including W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, D. H. Lawrence, Knut Hamsun, Henry Williamson, Wyndam Lewis, and Yukio Mishima—whose rejection of materialism, egalitarianism, and cultural decadence caused them to search for a vital, hierarchical alternative to both capitalism and communism, a search that led them to entertain and embrace proto-fascist, fascist, or National Socialist ideas.

Notes

[1] Zeev Sternhell, *Neither Left Nor Right: Fascist Ideology in France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

[2] Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, 1891.

[3] After the tour of C. H. Douglas to New Zealand, the banking system and usury were very well understood by the masses of people, and banking reform was a major platform that achieved Labour’s victory. As it transpired, they attempted to renege, but Lee succeeded in getting the Government to issue 1% Reserve Bank state credit to build the iconic and enduring State Housing project that in one

fell swoop reduced unemployment by 75%. Lee soon became a bitter opponent of the opportunism of the Labour politicians. However the state credit, albeit forgotten by most, stands as a permanent example of how a Government can bypass private banking and issue its own credit.

[4] Erik Olssen, *John A. Lee* (Dunedin, New Zealand: University of Otago Press, 1977), p. 66.

[5] K. R. Bolton, *Thinkers of the Right* (Luton: Luton Publications, 2003).

[6] *H. P. Lovecraft: Selected Letters*, ed. August Derleth and James Turner (Wisconsin: Arkham House, 1976), Vol. IV, p. 93.

[7] *Selected Letters*, vol. IV, p. 93.

[8] *Selected Letters*, vol. V, p. 162.

[9] *Selected Letters*, vol. IV, pp. 105–108.

[10] Quoted by E. Fuller Torrey, *The Roots of Treason* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1984), p. 138.

[11] Ezra Pound, *Jefferson and/or Mussolini, 1935* (New York: Liveright, 1970), pp. 33–34.

[12] Oswald Mosley, *Europe: Faith and Plan* (London: Euphorion, 1958), “The Doctrine of Higher forms,” pp. 143–47.

[13] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1975), “The Higher Man,” pp. 296–305. A glimpse of Nietzschean philosophy is alluded to in Lovecraft’s “Through the Gates of the Silver Key” where Carter discerns words from beyond the normal ken: “‘The Man of Truth is beyond good and evil,’ intoned a voice. ‘The Man of Truth has ridden to All-Is-One...’” (Lovecraft, *The Dream Quest of Unknown Kadath* [New York: Ballantine Books, 1982], “Through the Gates of the Silver Key,” p. 189).

[14] Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of The West*, 1928 (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1971).

[15] “Fascism . . . was a movement to secure national renaissance by people who felt themselves threatened with decline into decadence and death and were determined to live, and to live greatly.” Sir Oswald Mosley, *My Life* (London: Nelson, 1968), p. 287.

[16] *Selected Letters*, vol. IV, p. 323.

[17] H. P. Lovecraft, “Editorial,” *The Conservative*, vol. I, July 1915.

[18] *Selected Letters*, vol. IV, p. 133.

[19] *Selected Letters*, vol. V, pp. 330–33.

[20] *Selected Letters*, vol. V, p. 245.

[21] Lothrop Stoddard, *The Revolt of Against Civilization: The Menace of the Underman* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1922).

[22] *Selected Letters*, vol. IV, pp. 104–105.

[23] *Selected Letters*, vol. V, pp. 311–12.

[24] *Selected Letters*, vol. IV, pp. 15–16.

[25] *Selected Letters*, vol. IV, p. 22.

[26] *Selected Letters*, vol. IV, pp. 311–12.

[27] *Selected Letters*, vol. IV, p. 31.

[28] *Selected Letters*, vol. IV, pp. 193–95.

