

# BOOKS: REVIEWS AND ESSAYS

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## THE PEOPLE, THE ENEMY, AND THE VISION: A REVIEW ESSAY

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*Millennium Rage: Survivalists, White Supremacists, and the Doomsday Prophecy.* By Philip Lamy. 1996. New York: Plenum Press. Hardback. 295 pages.

*Fascism: Past, Present, and Future.* By Walter Laquer. 1996. New York: Oxford University Press. Hardback. 263 pages.

*All-American Monster: The Unauthorized Biography of Timothy McVeigh.* By Brandon M. Stickney. 1996. Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books. Hardback. 336 pages.

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Increasingly, scholars are looking at right-wing extremist and fascist movements today in the post cold war era. Instead of broader freedom, opportunity, and peace, the collapse of the Soviet Union has brought uncertainty, fear, and aggression. Some of the new movements chillingly recall Nazism and fascism from mid-century, while other incorporate new beliefs and agendas. A full understanding requires an historical perspective, to understand the development of the beliefs and changes over time as social conditions change, and also a look at what type of person joins an extremist movement, and why. All three books rely primarily on historical narrative. Although the timeframe varies, all seek to reconstruct the past as a means to understand the present. All three more or less succeed with this effort, but all three similarly lack a theory to explain possible causal relationships. Basically, they narrate historical events in their proper context, but they mostly do not discuss the findings beyond their immediate meaning. All three tend to take what people or groups say about themselves at face value, and do not critically analyze it further. Lamy and Laquer in particular discuss the wide array of right-wing extremist groups today, an array sufficiently diverse that the

term fascism seems grossly inadequate, such that the first task to understand right-wing extremism requires a clear concept of which extremist movements are accurately identified as right-wing.

One of the most striking things about contemporary right-wing extremism is the diversity of style and content. Indeed, most groups, especially in the United States, do not fit very well into conceptions of fascism based on mid-century manifestations. American groups draw heavily from religious fundamentalism, and often integrate notions of moral and racial purity premised on selected scriptural passages, as Lamy shows. At the most extreme, contemporary expression takes the form of apocalyptic doom, predictions of which rely primarily on passages from revelation that extremists apply to everyday conditions, such as crime, decline of the nuclear family, and so on (pp.135-145).

Yet, superficial differences belie an underlying consistency of beliefs and ideological content. In the U.S. in particular, old rhetoric from European fascism blends with evangelical and fundamentalist Christianity to form a distinctly American version of right-wing extremism. Basically, the U.S. creates its own distinctive brand of fascism that merges fundamentalism, racism, and totalitarianism in the unique American cultural context, such that extremism becomes predominantly a religious crusade of morality, racial purity, and authoritarian devotion to ultimate and transcendental beliefs. In the American context, and to a great extent in Europe as well, it is very difficult to explicitly sell a movement that calls for totalitarian rule, even if that is the practical end result (Laquer, pp. 218- 219). Thus, movements that contain fascistic elements often present them within a rhetoric of freedom, patriotism, local autonomy, individualism, and so on. A basic starting point then, requires an overhaul of conceptual terminology.

Laquer opens with the problem of accurate analytical categories, given the perplexing array of right-wing extremism and the more traditional forms of fascism. Although Laquer does not resolve his own problematic, what I gather from the three books here in review is that certain beliefs consistently underlie the right-extremist ideology, and this ideology appeals to specific people. If Stickney is accurate, then Timothy McVeigh represents a type who finds special appeal in right-wing ideology.

Many of the beliefs, such as millennialism, essential racial purity, authoritative organization, absolute moral dictums, total faith and devotion to literal readings of scripture, and so on, are not new, but contemporary extremism combines these elements in new and unique ways. At the same time, many groups still imitate the mid-century

European, and specifically German model. Laquer approaches the subject as someone cataloguing fascist movements according to very conventional attributes in mid-century, and creates a separate category for each type of movement in each country, based on explicit claims and agendas. He identifies clerical fascism in the middle-east, neofascism in Europe, right-wing Christian extremism in the U.S., and so on. Covering everything from skinheads, the National Front in France and Britain, to clerical dictatorships and orthodox radicalism in the middle east, Laquer concludes his introduction without a definition of fascism, or guidelines with which to categorize movements, other than locating them in their social-historical context. Although it is often undesirable to limit one's analysis to static categories, a researcher should provide at least general guidelines that bound the area under discussion.

Instead, Laquer resorts to established and safe generalities, using political parties as the unit of analysis. For example, he states that "in sum, few of the parties mentioned in this book are pure, unalloyed neofascism or right-wing extremism, but all contain certain such elements, some more, others less" (p.9). In other words, no one empirical example exactly matches the ideal-type, and whatever conceptual points we choose, some groups will exhibit those points more than others. True as this may be for any study, it allows the discussion to continue without a meaningful theoretical organization. The reader can expect descriptions of numerous examples, but no theoretical view to discern decisive points from those that are present but inconsequential.

Laquer examines political movements according to certain elements, in particular: doctrine, the leaders, the state and the party, religion, workers and peasants, terror, propaganda, culture, achievements, and daily life (pp.21-72). As he correctly shows, these things have all been salient for fascist movements in different times and places. However, no common thread emerges on its own accord. Without a concise research agenda, the project remains a collection of narratives that describe different examples of right-wing extremism, but does not explain either an internal ideological commonality or general conclusions about the relationship of fascism to social conditions. To understand fascism, past or present, one must ask specific questions. To this end, Lamy focuses on recurrent ideological themes in contemporary U.S. right-wing extremism, and Stickney examines Timothy McVeigh as an ideal-type adherent.

The present, we discover, is rooted firmly in the past. For present-day extremists, millennial beliefs trace back several hundred years and intersect with religious beliefs as well as American culture in general. Survivalists, white supremacists, and doomsday cults, which we may in

short classify as contemporary U.S. fascism (along with others) all derive their beliefs from millennial and other religious doctrine. This fundamental orientation shapes the way members see current events, which to them appear as grim indicators of approaching doom and Armageddon. Crime, moral decay, widespread divorce, abortion, general social upheaval mark the beginning of the end.

The question remains as to why people believe such doctrines in the first place. Despite a definitive sounding title, Laquer offers no definitive answer. Indeed, he dismisses existing attempts to ascertain the role of social preconditions, such as economic collapse and deprivation (p.8) and individual psychological motivations, such as an "authoritarian personality" (p.9). Laquer provides only general descriptions for a wide range of extremist movements, rather than a unifying theme or theory to explain similarities and differences. Since this book represents many years of study on the subject, the lack of overall coherence or some unifying theme is disappointing. Without a theoretical foundation, Laquer offers only historical specificity, that movements in early and mid-century are historical fascism, contemporary movements are neo-fascist, and at the same time, we see the emergence of post-fascism, which includes various types of right-wing extremism and clerical fascism in the U.S. and the middle-east. Since the cultures vary widely, as does the content of the ideology, understanding ideology alone does not explain right-wing extremism as a social phenomenon.

Today, if we approach the problem of fascism by studying the people who believe its ideology, rather than the content of the ideology, Timothy McVeigh is an obvious subject. Laquer suggests at various points in his narrative that "the basic tenets of neofascism are few and simple, sufficient for current political action... Fascism has traditionally been based on myths, intuition, instinct (such as the will to power and the voice of the blood), and the irrational, rather than on a closely argued system based on a detailed analysis of historical political and economic trends" (Laquer, p. 96). Very few if any people were likely converted by reading fascist philosophers such as Alfred Rosenberg, or even from reading *Mein Kampf*. Very few if any skinheads read intellectual fascist treatises or worry about complex philosophical doctrine. The appeal lies in emotional satisfaction and political expediency. Hence, McVeigh found the movement through emotionalism, and acted according to political impact.

Timothy McVeigh's past shows us the development of a characterological worldview that finds appeal in fascism. He grew up in Pendleton, New York, a traditional small town in the western part of the state. The residents consider themselves to be devoutly religious and

pride themselves on hard work. However, Stickney observes that "animosity and ignorance towards non-whites still exists in western New York and it struck hard when the national economy spiraled downward in the late 1970s and again in the 1980s" (p.56). Stickney theorizes that McVeigh was shaped by his social environment, which is a standard assumption in sociology. Unfortunately, much of McVeigh's formative years are still unclear, so Stickney can only speculate about the specific conditions and events that shaped McVeigh's character and worldview.

In high school, McVeigh showed considerable interest in guns, both talking about them and practicing with them. His other great passion was comic books. After his parents concluded a messy divorce, McVeigh supposedly retreated more into his world of comics and guns, but Stickney mostly speculates about this. Stickney also suggests that particular movies and events reinforced McVeigh's general distrust of people and the world. In a social environment of subtle yet powerful racial bigotry and distrust of the larger world, Stickney claims that "Tim would have seen" (p.72) the movie *The Last Day* (about a group of people in a small town who survive WWII by using special tactics). Further, "the impact on Tim would have been strong" (p.72) since it depicted metaphorically, how his life and world was facing extinction. Whether McVeigh actually saw this movie is unclear, and Stickney can only speculate (e.g. "the impact *would have been* strong") that McVeigh identified or had some fascination with doomsday and conspiracy stories in general because it reflected his own inner turmoil. Stickney is reasonable in his reconstruction, but the empirical link between McVeigh's upbringing and the Oklahoma City bombing remains tentative. Later, McVeigh's imaginary and metaphorical world would become increasingly real in his mind -- the world of the apocalypse.

Millennial beliefs are not new. Sometime around the year 95 A.D., a man named John recorded holy visions that would become the book of Revelations. Drawing from a literary tradition of several Hebrew prophets, and responding to the brutal persecutions by the emperor Titus Flavius Domitianus, John used scriptural style and metaphor to chronicle the events of the day and place them within a religious canon. Like every age, John saw the current events as timeless and of ultimate importance. As Lamy concludes, "Revelation presents the Roman persecutions of Christians as the beginning of a universal war between the forces of good and evil" (p.32).

Since that time, many movements have attempted to fit scripture to the events of their own day. In a little known moment, Columbus announced in 1501 that he himself was the Messiah prophesied to lead the Christian armies into Jerusalem in the final battle (p.47) with the

Great Evil and Armies of Satan in that day -- Islam. In the same way, contemporary millennialists attach biblical prophecy to present day events as proof that the end is approaching. On this point, contemporary right-wing slogans, such as "kill them all -- let God sort 'em out" actually has medieval historical roots. In 1209, during the French Inquisition and the Albigensian Crusade, knights following the Abbott Arnaud-Amalric asked how they would know the good from the wicked. In response, Arnaud-Amalric commanded to "kill them all! God will recognize his own" (Lamy, p. 42). Whether present-day extremists are consciously aware or not, this attitude has been present in numerous moral crusades and notions of ultimate conflict throughout history, and contemporary notions are only one moment in a millennial culture that depicts nearly every age as The Age of reckoning. In moral crusades, then as now, the enemy is so profoundly evil that some innocents must be sacrificed in order to destroy the forces of darkness.

In the United States today, most millennial beliefs revolve around notions of white supremacy, international conspiracies (often with the Jew at the center), and sometimes notions of satanic cabals, abductions, and ritualistic murder. Many of the parts and ascribed attributes are interchangeable, such that Christian Identity emphasizes the racial aspect in combination with satanic influence (pp.91-113), whereas militia movements emphasize international and liberal conspiracies (pp.115-134). In all cases, Lamy notes that imagery draws from both the biblical past, going back thousands of years, and from the particular events of U.S. history, especially race relations. Thus, "the American survivalist subculture provides one area where contemporary forms of the American millennial myth are expressed in both religious and secular ways... Although altered in form to fit the meaning of its users, symbols and images of the millennia myth such as the Apocalypse, Armageddon, and Babylon are appropriated by *Solider of Fortune* magazine, the Patriot movement, the militias, and white supremacist groups" (p.260). Collectively, these organizations are the current representation of apocalyptic culture.

At this point, Lamy, in my view, makes a serious mistake. He interprets the survivalist movement as something positive, that it represents a ray of hope in an otherwise bleak and fatalistic worldview on the far-right that anticipates, and even longs for, decay, mass destruction, and death. The survivalist perspective "also prophesies 'redemption' in the manner of surviving 'the great cosmic battle' and living on to build a new world, where independence, individualism, small communities, and greater autonomy will be the rewards" (p.261). Lamy seems out of touch with his own data. Throughout the book, he has closely linked survivalism with hate and destruction, that in many ways their ideology

and lifestyle is an escape from the real world (hence they live in isolated and armed compounds). Conjuring fantastical images of international conspiracies that lead to the ultimate conflict between the forces of Good and Evil does not seem like a worldview in touch with reality. Of course, all sorts of collusions actually occur -- price fixing, political alliances both overt and covert, and sometimes people turn against each other in desperation. Monopolies do exert real power and influence, and politicians do favor the interests of powerful, especially economic players. However, various political-economic theories explain such collusions in relatively straightforward ways, based on empirical evidence. In simple terms, corporations pursue profit, often in ruthless ways that create social upheaval and conflict, not because they are evil incarnate, but because their position in the economic system requires them to do so.

In sharp contrast, the survivalist belief in supernatural powers and strict dichotomies of Good and Evil hearkens more to McVeigh's comic book world. Moreover, the utopian vision that drives far-right movements is more like a childhood fantasy where everything is just like today except with perfect justice, perfect harmony, perfect honesty, integrity, and meaning. Such visions hardly seem like a realistic model for life after Armageddon. Lamy does not seem to realize the bleak yet childlike vision of the present holds inextricably with the childlike vision of the future. Both evidence a desperate person who is more or less ready for desperate measures, including violence against the innocent, in the name of a higher, more pure, and divine moral crusade.

McVeigh eventually proved ready, and presently, we do not know for sure what led him to the Murrah federal building in Oklahoma City. However, Stickney looks at the available evidence, and reconstructs a likely path. As with most of the far-right adherents, McVeigh became a loner, a disillusioned youth who now, as an adult, found himself in a threatening and mysterious world. Stickney, as with Lamy, suggests that the millennialist joins their respective group because it offers the same sort of security as their fantasy world. In the case of McVeigh, guns and the straightforward politics and ideology of the militias closely mirrored the clear-cut divisions of good and evil found in comic books. *Soldier of Fortune* is perhaps best understood as a comic book (however sinister) for adults.

One important issue that remains is how people like McVeigh willingly transform ideology to action. Stickney develops an explanation based on two basic forces, one social, one neurological, the result of alleged chemical weapons used in the Persian Gulf War. However, Stickney seems much more comfortable discussing the latter, saying that

"McVeigh, whose mind was likely affected by those chemicals, was back at his old barracks with renewed fanaticism for guns... and ready for the eventual showdown when the agents and the liberals in Washington would try to take his country from him" (p.120). Apparently, the chemicals caused McVeigh to become unrealistic and affected his nervous system in such a way that he could not accurately perceive reality. Stickney describes various social-psychological factors, for example that McVeigh failed the special forces test (and thus his quest for glory), but Stickney does not explore such events and how they shaped McVeigh's outlook, other than it made him dejected and resentful. Stickney asserts that from this time on, McVeigh left the service and became increasingly disillusioned with the United States government. Perceived illegitimate raids on 'real Americans' like Randy Weaver at Ruby Ridge, and the assault on the Branch Davidian compound reinforced for McVeigh that direct action would be necessary to stop the rapacious government rampage against its own people.

Just as McVeigh mobilized with the government to defend his world against foreign threat in the middle-east, now he mobilized again, this time against the government. McVeigh was captured on film in Waco, outside the Davidian compound, "part of a group of protesters angry over the government's ongoing raid." McVeigh passed out bumper stickers that said; "is your church ATF approved?" (p.155). Eventually, McVeigh circulated around various militia groups and reunited with his friends, Terry Nichols and Michael Fortier. In combination with militia culture, the three friends further isolated themselves from the world and reinforced each other's paranoia. This process concluded on April 19th, 1995, with the bombing of the Murrah federal building.

Stickney narrates many facts, coupled with an equal measure of speculation, but he offers no explanation. Most importantly, he does not address how McVeigh changed from a regular and popular high school youth, through his decorated service in the Gulf War, and eventually became a calculated murderer who believed the U.S. government was an agent in an elaborate international conspiracy for immoral monsters to seize control of the world. The process by which a normal youth becomes "An All-American Monster" remains unclear. How does a person accept a worldview so far from even a possible reality that perception reaches the level of delusion? At this psychological level, Stickney also fails. The best he offers is that "Tim McVeigh would appear to be on the radical end of a spectrum describing people who are truly angry about politics. Those willing to engage in violence often think that the government is intentionally wrong and evil..." (p.197). By this account, McVeigh, and other like him, are not just angry at government injustice, but really, really angry. Governments do commit actual

injustices, and people often become angry in response. However, Stickney fails to realize that McVeigh crossed over into a delusional realm. His enemies were not real government officials and their actions, but government officials whom McVeigh perceived to be literal incarnations of evil, living evil demi-gods bent on world conquest and domination -- not for political-economic reasons, but because of their inherent evilness. It would be interesting to know how McVeigh crossed over from right-wing conservatism to delusional fanaticism.

If we still do not know how this social transformation process occurs, we at least know the ideologies and stated purposes of contemporary right-wing groups. Where Lamy offers descriptions of millennial beliefs, Laquer provides historical context for right-wing extremism in its various forms throughout the 20th century. In his conclusion, Laquer accepts militia self-depictions at face value, so that even though McVeigh, Nichols, and Fortier planned the Murrah bombing in detail, Laquer still sees "American extremist groups as defensive in nature" (p.224) trying to defend a fading lifestyle. This is in fact what militias say about themselves, that the government, not the militias, are perpetrating acts of violence; the militias are merely defending themselves. Laquer accepts this, and moves on. It is difficult to imagine how the children in the day-care center at the Murrah federal building could have perpetrated violence against 'real-Americans' and as children posed a threat to the 'true' American way of life. Laquer concludes with only the broadest generalities, already well-known: "fascism arises at a time of economic, social, and political crisis... (p.227)."

Lamy's conclusions are also unsatisfying and sometimes overstated. He sees millennialism as a central element of American culture, both for extremists and in the mainstream. Lamy contends that "millennium rage reaches beyond the subcultural practice of survivalism into the American popular culture. In American television and film, in popular music, and in toys, games, and other leisure time activities, survivalist and apocalyptic themes and images permeate popular culture. We all partake of the millennial myth at different times and places" (p.264). Certainly, millennial images and phrasing abound, but Lamy accepts it all at face value, that it all means the same thing and is somehow all connected. He does not consider that media may use millennial phrasing, such as "Apocalypse at Waco" to sensationalize the story, or that just because something is present in our culture does not mean it has equal meaning and significance for everyone. Every *Dungeons and Dragons* player understands the difference between fantasy apocalypse and real-life apocalypse -- if the latter exists at all.

What confounds all three authors is the underlying irrationality behind extremist ideology, that people really believe outlandish conspiracies, that certain people are perceived literal embodiments of pure evil. Moreover, people like McVeigh, Koresh, Jim Jones, Charles Manson, Pol Pot, and other apocalyptic types see people as objects to further their own ends. Yet the issue does not rest on cleverly manipulative leaders, nor exposure to seductive ideology. The appeal of right-wing extremism, and therefore its ability to inflict harm in the world, depends on social conditions, upbringing, and experience that make some people more or less willing to follow. How these experiences shape the individual is crucial, because only people can have thoughts, hold values, take up arms, fight wars, and persecute other people. Words are nothing more than words, unless people endow them with divine importance and act accordingly.