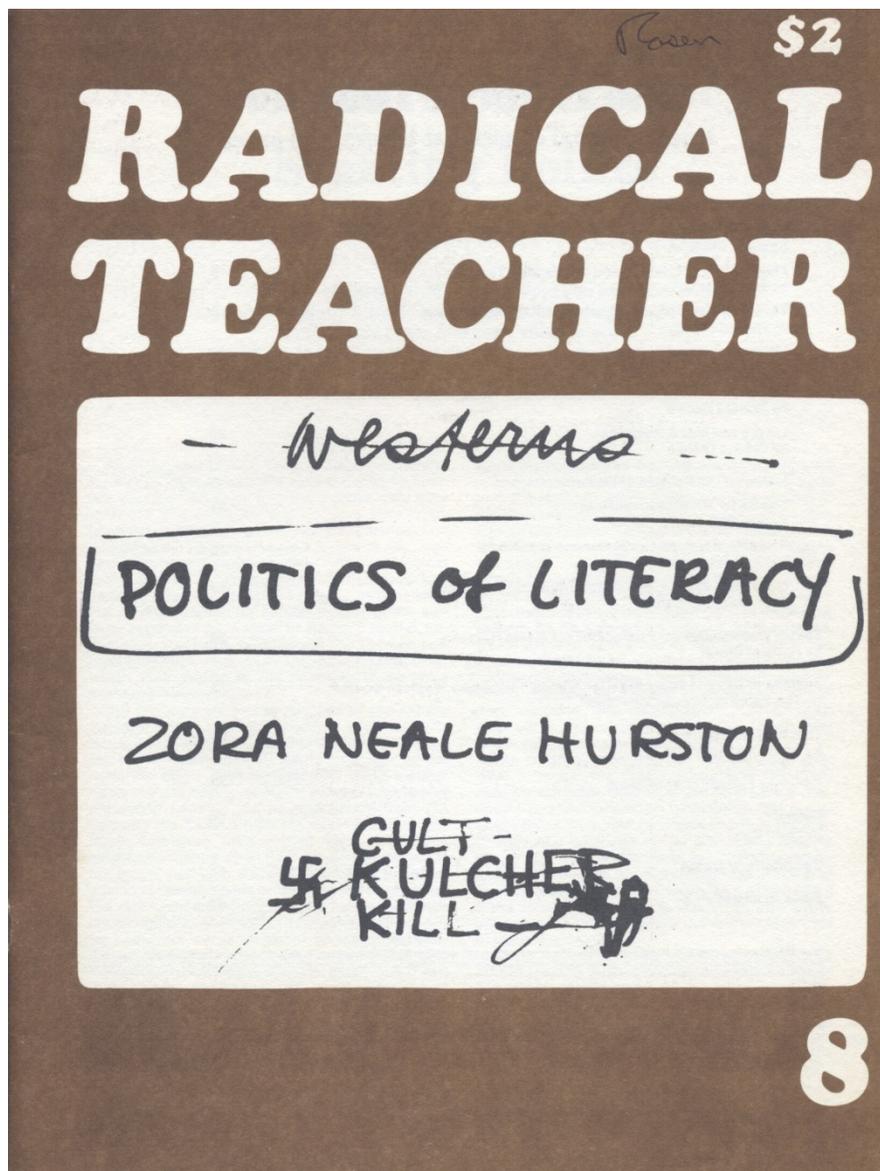


RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Teaching Nazi Culture

by Patty Lee Parmalee



What has to be explained is not the fact that the man who is hungry steals or the fact that the man who is exploited strikes, but why the majority of those who are hungry don't steal and why the majority of those who are exploited don't strike.

–Wilhelm Reich, The Mass Psychology of Fascism

Nazi Culture would seem at first to be a very esoteric subject to teach to the rather practical-minded and not very cosmopolitan students of a northern New Jersey state college. But of course it is really a distancing technique, a *Verfremdungseffekt* à la Brecht. Teaching fascism is not really teaching fascism per se, but an angle for teaching capitalism and socialism. And teaching Nazi culture is an angle for teaching some of the purposes of capitalist ideology.

Students at Ramapo College come from working-class, lower-middle-class, and professional backgrounds. The majority are Catholic, some are adults, and most of them hold jobs while going to school. (They talk a lot about the nature of their work in relation to the course, e.g., hierarchies on the job and the Nazi divide-and-conquer technique of building hierarchies.) Like most working-class students they are, and should be, resistant to the kind of radical teaching that simply intones "socialism good, capitalism bad." In courses I have taught that were directly about capitalism or socialism, usually half the students have been with me, and the other half (thinking before I opened my mouth that I was going to try to convert them) have either resisted openly or, worse, given me what they thought I wanted and gone into resentful inner emigration. I know this is a fairly universal experience for teachers at non-elite colleges, and we usually save our ego and sense of accomplishment by rationalizing: "No teacher can reach everyone."

But to my surprise I found in the classes on fascism I seemed to be reaching everyone. Probably the number of "cadre" produced will be no greater than usual (nor do I consider that the purpose of teaching), but that normally resistant 50% had their notions of capitalism and socialism severely shaken up, perhaps for the first time, and they learned to recognize a historical phenomenon as a reality in their own lives: they became very sensitive to fascist tendencies anywhere. And perhaps more important, these students who have had very little practice in analyzing their society were able to approach the most important question of the course – why do people act against their own interest – with at least the beginnings of real concrete answers.

On the first day of class I asked students to write a paragraph on "What is fascism?" Most of them got in something about militarism, anti-semitism, and an authoritarian all-powerful state, and almost no one mentioned anything about the economic structure, except that about a third assumed it was some kind of communism. (I handed back these little essays on the last day of class without comment, so they could see for themselves whether they had learned anything.) I didn't say anything about that assumption till later in the course;

what interested me then was that universally everyone knew fascism was bad stuff. No need to try to persuade anyone of that. And so, uniquely in my teaching experience, the teacher and all the students were able to start out with a shared value system. I was able to make use of a knee-jerk reaction. (Clearly, the course would never work the same in Germany.) Both the problem and the opening then became that anything that looks like fascism is also bad. Unfortunately, lots of things about some socialist countries look like fascism. It is necessary to be open about that, not to ridicule students' confusion but to discuss Stalinism and the conditions under which socialism developed in the Soviet Union. But fascism is a form of capitalism, the epitome in fact of capitalism, and the more students learn about the structures of fascist economy and even ideology, the more they themselves see the parallels to the society they live in. They are very receptive to discussions of true and false community; in fact it soon becomes necessary to warn them against using the term "fascist" too loosely to describe their own society.

The perfect introduction to the course is Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor chapter from *The Brothers Karamazov*. A brilliant, prophetic explanation of authoritarianism, it expounds the philosophical rationale for believing that people fear freedom and need a strong leader and something to believe in, specifically "miracle, mystery, and authority" – and it tells all this from the point of view of the "benevolent" despot, the elite, the misleader. Students are challenged and frustrated by the Inquisitor's arguments against freedom; I ask them to debate him. Ultimately they decide they have to reject his premise about human nature that people will "never, never be able to share among themselves." Parallels to Skinner are obvious to students. The story stimulates an early discussion of the need for community: it is in fact a legitimate desire which we see manifest all around us. But that desire is co-opted by the creation of false community, which happens through everyone's relation to a higher authority. Authority prevents the creation of true community, which is built on horizontal, equal relationships. Examples of false community abound from our society: the Church, dictatorships, gurus, spectator sports, and Roosevelt's fireside chats. Dostoevsky also shows convincingly the need for something transcendent to believe in, which the Nazis understood very well. But where does the need for miracle, mystery and authority come from? That question introduces the rest of the course: Reich and Fromm answer it through social psychology, Neumann and Guerin (etc.) through political economy.

But first we develop the contradictions of Weimar, using the Introduction to Franz Neumann's *Behemoth* (New York: Harper & Row, 1944, 1963) as a text and looking at two films: *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari* and *Metropolis* (both available from Janus Films). Neumann's thesis here is essentially that the rapid economic development of Germany and its lack of colonies made expansion and overthrow of the obsolete political system necessary. There were various methods by which the German bourgeoisie could have achieved these ends peacefully, but they were all rejected because they would have meant giving up

some power to the working class. This left violent expansion into the rest of Europe as the only possibility.

Metropolis is (among other things) a symbol of the Weimar liberals' desire for easy solutions to class conflict in the face of glaring and beautifully portrayed contradictions and opposed interests. Through its graphic power and its flimsy resolution, it persuades the students, even against their will, that the class issues could not be smoothed over and are an important focus for study.

When we watch *Caligari* we ignore temporarily the question (raised by the framing technique) of whether Francis is mad. We look just at the implications of his symbolic story and find them extraordinarily prescient and foreboding. I ask the students who (in Francis' story) is the criminal; who carries out the criminal's acts; who controls whom; whether that control is in Cesare's interest; and what Francis' role is. The story shows a world where the sleepwalking and hypnotized Cesare (the German people) is made to carry out the murderous acts of a megalomaniac,

causing Cesare's own ultimate destruction; the lone sane antifascist (Francis) is a voice crying in the wilderness, ultimately himself declared insane by the madman because the latter has power. If I can restrain myself I wait till after the discussion to tell students the film was made in 1918.

Two more films we saw near the beginning were Riefenstahl's *Olympia* and her *Triumph of the Will*. (We also read the good article by Susan Sontag on Riefenstahl in a 1975 *New York Review*, called "Fascinating Fascism.") We saw them early because they too raise questions in students' minds. I give them a short essay I wrote to stimulate class discussion on *Olympia*: is it just documentary? Does beauty (Riefenstahl's defense) exonerate fascism? Why blow all that money filming an apolitical sports event? Is it a fascist film? *Triumph of the Will* makes clear what vast support the Nazis had (even if it was staged), helping us define true fascism as a mass movement, not (as in Chile and South Africa, which come up frequently as comparisons) a dictatorship imposed against the will of the majority. And so the question is: why did people support it, i.e., why did they act against their interests – and it is because *that's* the question we want to answer that we look, eventually, at Nazi culture.

Because ultimately of course what we are interested in is why working (and middle-class) people in our own

society act against their own interest. And gradually it becomes apparent that we are studying Nazi culture because in the Third Reich the techniques of manipulation were conscious and deliberate. Since the Nazi leaders knew what they were doing, we can find clues to what our own leaders and tastemakers may be doing less consciously (or with their motives less clear to us).

I thought it was necessary to understand the political economy of National Socialism before looking at ideology, but I might do it the other way around in the future because students can get more interested in the latter, and it's easier for them. Also the book I chose, Neumann's *Behemoth*, was very difficult, so that I had to print up outlines to help them read it. But I would still use that book. It is a beautifully reasoned example of materialist methodology; it was written before the defeat of fascism but forecasts its instability; and it makes very clear that fascism is capitalism. It is also exciting for students to learn how to read difficult but worthwhile material, if the

teacher sticks with them and really teaches how to read it.

Behemoth was the major text of the course, but describing the discussions we had about it would require double the length of this discussion. I will make only one suggestion for future use: that selections from it should be made with an emphasis on issues of class. Neumann is strong on 1) whether any

economic or political power was actually taken away from the large capitalists; 2) the Jews as the *visible* but not powerful capitalists (middlemen, store-owners, etc.); 3) the impact of fascism on the working class, always watching for the real power it was given rather than rhetoric; 4) the equivocal position and pivotal importance of the middle class; 5) the evidence of conscious class struggle; and 6) the methods used by Nazis to co-opt the left's base (red flag, left song melodies, National "Socialism," anti-capitalist rhetoric); students must understand the techniques by which capitalism masquerades as anti-capitalism.

Conveniently the book ends with a discussion of Nazi society, moving us into a study of the psychology and the arts of Nazism. But first, we saw the film *Night and Fog*, bringing in the shocker only now, to remind ourselves that we are not just studying theories but theories that resulted in enormous human waste. And we asked: what would you have done if you were inside one of those boxcars? or guarding them? How does a victim or an accomplice rebel?



(At some point we must all confront the victim and the fascist within us.)

Pushing the question how we ourselves would behave, we looked at the Milgram experiments in obedience to authority, with a film called *Obedience* and an article by Edgar Friedenberg in *Ramparts* called "The Privilege of Violence." The salient points in our discussion of the experiments were that people tend to obey, even against their gut desire, if 1) they perceive authority as legitimate and 2) they are relieved of "responsibility." Shades of the Grand Inquisitor. And of course the question everyone asks is again, Would I obey or rebel? or, How can society raise people who will rebel?

So we read Wilhelm Reich's *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (the first half). This fascinating and uneven work

the following theory of the relation between sexism and fascism:

It is the externalization of submissiveness that allows totalitarianism to triumph. But where do people learn submissiveness? The character structure of the dominated class is molded by the dominating class to fit the latter's needs like a machine. The daily obeisances that we make produce a habit that revolutionary tracts are ill-equipped to cure, partly because they ignore it.

We can see in the role of women (and children) the measure of civilization of a society. Reich says reaction always limits women's sex role to procreation, that it is terrified of sexually awakened women (and homosexuals). Why? A repressive society needs women to have constant sexual anxiety and guilt feelings so they will always feel



interested most of the students more than anything else we read, because it relates their own personal lifestyles to a whole social system: so much that they thought was private turns out to have public significance. There are many topics in the book that stimulated discussion, such as Reich's materialist method ("Ideology as a Material Force") and his criticism of the CP's economism. But for students the most immediate and fascinating of his ideas was the relationship between women's oppression/repression and class oppression. Here we were able to reverse the *Verfremdung* technique and use the personal experience of women, men, and former children in the class to illuminate the authoritarian state's microcosm and training ground, the authoritarian family – making the strange familiar now, instead of making the familiar strange. Through discussion of Reich and their own experiences, the class developed

powerless, because it is they who bring up the new generation of men and women: they must train their children in the habit of obedience. Mother teaches kids social values before the kids are able to reject them: her neurotic, guilt-inducing method is more effective than the authoritarian father's brutal method, just as in the state the role of propaganda is more important than the role of terror. The authoritarian (not necessarily the same thing as nuclear) family is a tiny version of the state, where the habit of obedience is learned, or more precisely the habit of suppressing natural desires because an authority tells you to. (Reich is referring to masturbation but surely the principle is wider.) Reich says that the suppression of natural drives (of women and children) leads to distortions, sadomasochism, and the will to enslavement. People are encouraged (think of *Bambi's* father -- *Bambi* is a very fascist film -- or the Lone Ranger or Marcus Welby) to need

a protective father whose power they can identify with rather than feeling their own power. Think of the frustrated creativity this leads to and the need for an object (children, in family; Jews and Communists, in society) to take that frustration out on.

Consequently, fighting against sexism is fighting against authoritarianism, and everyone on the left *must* care about it, or lose. We should be very suspicious of any attempts to idealize women, making us mysterious, exalted mothers, or otherwise very different from men. This is usually an excuse to give us honor instead of power and to keep us frustrated and dependent, filling us with ideology to justify our repression and oppression. All these terms that we have used so often when talking about private relationships take on new meaning when they refer to the relationship to the paternal authoritarian state.

For comic relief we then deal briefly with the madman and demonic theories that attempt to explain the mass phenomenon of fascism as hypnosis by a mystical power. The most extreme and therefore amusing example of this approach is a book called *The Spear of Destiny* (New York: Bantam Books, 1973) by Trevor Ravenscroft, which shows that Hitler held the destiny of the world in his hands because he claimed and understood the occult powers of the spear of Longinus, which had pierced the side of Christ. Another example of the personalization of fascism, also useful for teaching because it is so clearly misleading, is the psychological study *The Mind of Adolf Hitler* (New York: Signet, 1973) by Walter C. Langer. By now students are ready to reject this emphasis on the leader, seeing that it exonerates the followers, ignores the structures and therefore repeatability in other circumstances, treats people as homogeneous, not divided into classes, and is ultimately neither useful nor interesting.

Finally the last section of the course deals with the arts under National Socialism; we use George Mosse's *Nazi Culture* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1968) and student seminar papers. By this point the reasons for monumental architecture, Dionysian music, idealized naturalistic art, etc., are clear to the students, and they can also understand why avant-garde art was subversive. The main purposes in studying the arts become: 1) a discussion of issues of form and content or purpose, and 2) recognition of similar styles in one's own society or in other historical periods. By now too, from reading Neumann, students understand well enough the difference between socialism and national socialism to be able to discuss true and false

community intelligently, and to begin to deal with the very difficult problem of Stalinist art policies. I do not believe it is honest to teach Nazi art without mentioning how similar Stalin's or Zhdanov's policies were. The goal of socialism may be the opposite of the goal of fascism, but socialism can be perverted, and we want students to be able to recognize its perversions. A really thorough study of the structural similarities and differences between Stalinist Russia and Nazi Germany was far beyond the scope of the course, and it is hard to broach the subject lightly without reinforcing old anticommunist attitudes. But it must be done. Even the use of Dostoevsky runs the risk of reinforcing the doctrine, which students get from other teachers, that socialism and fascism are just two kinds of totalitarianism. But by the end of the course they are surprisingly subtle and open-minded about the distinctions, probably because they have discovered many of them for themselves.

I didn't plan any contemporary comparisons to Nazism but they kept cropping up all the time. Several students brought in literature about Senate Bill 1, shocked by its similarity to what they were studying. During the course we made three increasingly sophisticated attempts to define fascism, involving comparisons to various police states as well as U.S. policy toward Indians, Vietnamese, blacks, prisoners. My general approach was to encourage students to restrict the use of the term "fascist" rather than expand it: it gets thrown around very sloppily by the left. But at the same time I encouraged observation of racism, sexism, mass cultural manipulation, and other kinds of repression.

Besides requiring a term paper on a cultural subject, I also asked each student to keep a journal in which he or she noted fascistic (and anti-fascistic) tendencies in overheard conversations, teachers, parents, lovers, newspaper clippings, etc. The lesson intended from that focus was Reich's lesson that the proper study of fascism is the study of the people, not the leaders. Because if we can understand what he calls the "cleavage"—between the working class or middle class economic situations and their ideology—we can begin to develop people who do not need miracle, mystery, and authority, and who will perceive in a Milgram situation that they do have a choice.

Ideally the Nazi culture course should be followed by one on culture that liberates.



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