Ever since the scope of the destruction it unleashed, the depths of horror it plunged the world into and the apex of brutality it reached, fascism has duly become a taboo, something to be condemned, repudiated, and disclaimed. But this has not always been the case. There was a time when fascism held a great attraction for many people, including first-rank intellectuals and highly placed politicians in countries that did not turn fascist; a time when Winston Churchill, today remembered mainly as a staunch fighter against fascism, could say that fascism “has rendered a service to the whole world…. Hereafter no great nation will be unprovided with an ultimate means of protection against the cancerous growth of Bolshevism” (Goldring 1945: 223), and described Mussolini further as “the greatest law-giver among living men” (Harbutt 1986: 30);¹ and a time when Foreign Secretary Lord Halifax and Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain—today remembered mainly as feeble, pacifistic democrats, too slight to take up Hitler’s gauntlet and too blind even to perceive that it had been thrown down—could express admiration for Hitler personally, and for his National Socialism politically: Lord Halifax, regarded Nazi Germany in November 1937 as “a bulwark of the west against Bolshevism” (Leibovitz and Finkel 1998: 103), while in Chamberlain’s view, as reported to the King on September 1938, Germany and England “were the two pillars of European peace and buttresses against communism” (25–26).

This large-scale appreciation and at times outright collusion—finding expressions political, economic, cultural—has now traditionally become, not so much a source of embarrassment, as of denial. The attempt is frequently to dis-own fascism, to make it the affair of someone else, preferably of one’s political and ideological antagonists. Conservatives and liberals have recurrently laid it at the door of socialism

¹ Churchill’s “admiration” for Mussolini, the author stresses, “continued to the brink of World War II.”
...and of communism and have been content with making fascism at least the dialectical twin of socialism, if not its outright manifestation. It mattered little that, when fascism was still an historical reality, it was widely regarded precisely as the universal cure against socialism and communism, “the necessary antidote to the Russian poison,” again in Churchill’s words, and that whole parties, conservative and liberal, had drastically thinned and dwindled in direct proportion to the degree that the fascists had been beating up the lefties; that conservative and liberal politicians had formed all kinds of alliances with the fascists, ran with them to parliament, sat with them in coalitions, invited them to take power, while the left-wing parties, who retained their mass support almost undiminished, were being outlawed, their leaders and supporters persecuted, imprisoned, driven into exile, even murdered.

The Liberal Northwest: Immune to Fascism?

Not all interpretations, of course, have gone quite that far. But even many of the more moderate readings portray fascism as something alien, and employ, as I have argued, a Brechtian Verfremdungseffekt, yet not in order to problematize the familiar, but to make it appear safe, habitable, reasonable. The common effort is to localize the catastrophe, so as to envelop its environs in a tranquil, civilized light. There are numerous instances of such a procedure. I take Michael Mann’s book on fascism as an example, which lends this approach to history one of its more sophisticated and erudite voices and whose theoretical framework processes and incorporates the contributions of Sternhell,

---

2 See the case of such major German parties as the centrist-liberal DVP and the right-wing DNVP, which, between them, had 22.9 percent of the national vote in 1928, before the great Nazi electoral breakthrough of 1930, only to be reduced to a combined 7.3 percent in July 1932, and making the slightest of recoveries in November, with 9.8 percent (see Gluckstein 1999: 79). A similar situation obtained in Italy in the years preceding the fascist take over (see, De Grand 1982: 34–35, 45).

3 During the last phase of the Republic of Weimar and the meteoric rise of the Nazis, the combined electoral share of the left-wing parties, communists and socialists, suffered only marginal losses: from 40.4 percent in 1928 to 36.1 in July 1932 and 37.3 in November. In fact, in the last year of the Republic, the total left-wing share of the votes was higher than it had been in the two elections of 1924: 33.9 and 35.1 (see Gluckstein 1999: 79). In Italy, as well, in May 1921, amid the violence of the squadristi, “the combined Socialist and Communist vote…dropped only slightly from the high point of 1919,” at the time that the fascist party outvoted Giolitti’s Liberals, their allies of the national bloc (De Grand 1982: 34).