

DRIEU, CÉLINE:  
FRENCH FASCISM, SCAPEGOATING,  
AND THE PRICE OF REVELATION

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Although **the Girardian** concept of the scapegoat **and its attendant** phenomena have a number of obvious implications for the study of fascism, **to date the** connection has been addressed only in broadly theoretical terms. In *Des Choses cachées* and in subsequent works, René Girard has alluded to modern political scapegoating such as the Nazi persecution of the Jews as examples of mass victimizations where the enormous number of victims represents **an** effort to compensate for the failure of the scapegoating process itself in the wake of Christian **revelation.**<sup>1</sup> **While the victims are initially vilified, they** are not sacralized after their sacrifice, and order is maintained **only so long** as a steady stream of victims is forthcoming. As Andrew McKenna explains in *Violence and Difference*, "**with** the passing of the sacred order, of the sacred *tout court*, sacrifice becomes less and less capable of uniting the community and therefore demands more and more victims . . . the decline of symbolic violence brings an increase of real victims; their quantity mounts in inverse proportion to the ritual efficacy of sacrifice, and victimage appears more and more gratuitous" (159-60). Moreover, McKenna continues, victimage of this sort becomes increasingly untraceable, rootless, and it is this aspect of official Nazi anti-Semitism, for example, which allowed many Nazis in their postwar trials to proclaim their innocence for **their roles in the** Final Solution by insisting that they were "only following orders" (162-3).

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<sup>1</sup> See *Things Hidden* 128-9. For a more general discussion of the persecution of ethnic minorities as a source of social cohesiveness, see the essays "**Violence and Representation**" and "Generative Scapegoating."

These observations certainly help to illuminate the role of scapegoating in Nazi racial politics and in the Holocaust in particular. They are less helpful, however, in understanding other paradigms of fascism in which anti-Semitism did not play as central a role or in cases in which fascist ideology was not synonymous with government policy or political hegemony. The role of scapegoating in Italian Fascism, for example, is more difficult to ascertain than it is in Nazism because anti-Semitism was less crucial as a means of establishing social cohesiveness, at least until Nazi influence became predominant during World War II (Soucy xviii). In France, the presence of a number of fascist movements from the twenties through the end of the Occupation, and the absence of an autonomous fascist state during the same period, make the task of assessing the role of scapegoating even more difficult. This is especially true in light of the fact that a number of French fascist movements were not anti-Semitic, at least until it became expedient to be so to curry favor with the Nazis. In *French Fascism: The First Wave*, Robert Soucy notes that during the interwar years, fascist groups including "the *Jeunesse Patriotes*, the *Croix de Feu* and the *Faisceau* . . . welcomed Jews into their ranks" (xviii).

The lack of a consistent attitude towards the Jews is, in fact, just one of several points of divergence among French fascists and fascist groups prior to World War Two. As a result, historians and political theorists who have studied French fascism have strongly disagreed as to its origins as well as its **basic** ideology. In *Neither Right nor Left: Fascist Ideology in France*, Zeev Sternhell argues that "the history of fascism can be described as a continuous attempt to revise marxism and create a national form of socialism" (20). Soucy, on the other hand, insists that on many of the most important social and political issues, including "taxation, government spending, nationalization, property rights, class conflict, religion, education, and foreign policy, French Fascism was overwhelmingly conservative" (xi). Other historians, especially among the French themselves, have gone so far as to insist that there is no such thing as French fascism, that such a creature, if it existed at all, was merely an import, a watered-down version of Nazism or Italian Fascism.<sup>2</sup>

If no consensus as to the nature or even the existence of French fascism can be reached by analyzing the programs of the various parties and groups, it is perhaps helpful to examine texts of French fascist writers and intellectu-

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<sup>2</sup> This was especially true in the years following the Occupation, when collaboration with the Nazis was generally presented as a very limited phenomenon involving only a small number of fanatics and opportunists. Along these lines, see Rémond 254-318.

als in order to find beliefs and attitudes held in common which might be identified as determining traits of their fascism. Here again, a number of difficulties present themselves. Which fascist artists and intellectuals should be examined and what crucial link or links tie them to each other and make them fascists? In aesthetic terms alone, the refined classical traditionalism of the *normalien* Robert Brasillach could hardly be more at odds with the crude modernist populism of Louis-Ferdinand Céline, for example. Similarly, Céline's concern with urban life and Parisian decadence is certainly not comparable to the primitivism and Barresian cult of the soil of figures like Hitler's murky apologist, Alphonse de Chateaubriant, or the misguided collaborator, Jean Giono. The pacifism of figures like Giono and Céline distinguish them from the likes of Drieu la Rochelle and Henry de Montherlant, veterans of the First World War who believed in the sanctity of war. On the subject of anti-Semitism, views differed widely, and there was even strong disagreement among self-professed anti-Semites as to the nature and degree of Jewish culpability and socially acceptable forms of racial hatred. Following the dubious categories established recently by modern-day fascist Maurice Bardèche in his study of Céline, and Jacques Derrida in his defense of Paul de Man in "Like the Sound of the Sea Deep Within a Shell: Paul de Man's War," one might describe Céline, whose vociferous hatred of the Jews knew no bounds, as a "crude" anti-Semite and Drieu and Brasillach as more "refined" anti-Semites, since their hostilities were couched most often in terms of general denunciations of modern decadence and criticisms of France's loss of vitality as a nation.<sup>3</sup>

Despite these differences, what these writers did share was an obsession with the decadence of modernity and a fascination with various forms of sacrifice and ritualized violence. In *Agonies of the Intellectual*, Allan Stoekl argues that these were indeed the concerns of *all* thirties engaged intellectuals, individuals, Stoekl believes, obsessed with the following questions: "How could ritual murder (sacrifice) be seen as liberating? How could the collective frenzy of crowds—seen first at fascist rallies—reinvigorate a society that offered nothing but alienation and exploitation? What role did the thinking, critical individual (the intellectual) play in the reform and renewal of society?" (58). Stoekl goes on to argue that what separated the fascist from the leftist is the leftist's insistence on a constructive, socially productive form

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<sup>3</sup> See Bardèche. Derrida's essay is included in *Responses*. The recent publication of *Drieu's Journal*, with its obsessive and venomous anti-Semitism, makes it hard to classify him among "refined" anti-Semites. On the other hand, he never indulged in public outpourings of racial hatred comparable to the diatribes in Celine's pamphlets.

of sacrifice, whereas the fascist's need for sacrifice was satisfied by nihilistic, apocalyptic eruptions.

Stoekl's final claim is, I believe, dangerously misleading, since it results in a serious misinterpretation of fascist intellectual practice in the thirties and the vestiges of that practice as they manifest themselves in modern French society. A closer look at fascist attitudes from a Girardian perspective reveals not only a more constructive view of the function and role of sacrificial violence in society but a common faith in and understanding of the victimage mechanism, as well as a cynical willingness to exploit it to achieve personal as well as communal goals. As they do for the dubious young fascist hero of Sartre's *L'Enfance d'un chef*, Lucien Fleurier, unanimous violence and sacrifice become the means of personal and/or social salvation in major fascist fictions of the thirties and forties. Two of these fictions are especially worthy of note: Louis-Ferdinand Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit* and Drieu la Rochelle's *Gilles*.

Published in 1932 to wide popular acclaim, Céline's novel, *Voyage au bout de la nuit* is not generally considered to be of a piece with his more infamous fascistic and venomously anti-Semitic pamphlets of the late thirties and early forties, *Bagatelles pour un massacre* and *Les Beaux Draps*. Generally welcomed by the left for its urban populism, the novel as well as the novelist were nevertheless viewed with suspicion by a few anti-fascist intellectuals including the Communist, Paul Nizan, who detected something ominous in the vitriolic and all-encompassing tirades of the novel's protagonist, Ferdinand Bardamu. A brief look at one of the more famous scenes in *Voyage*, the *Admiral Bragueton* episode, justifies Nizan's reservations. More importantly for our purposes here, it also exposes Bardamu's understanding and manipulation of the scapegoating mechanism, a knowledge Céline himself would later exploit in the politically charged context of the pamphlets.

While on a steamship journey from France to Africa, Bardamu comes to the troubling conclusion that he has somehow aroused the unanimous hostility of his shipmates. Fearful of how the situation might develop, Bardamu tries to determine what offense he has given and how his misdeed could have inspired such widespread, intense hatred. What he learns is most disconcerting. His "crime," as it were, is to have been the only passenger on board who paid his own passage. As to the atmosphere of suspicion and barely repressed hostility that prevails on board, it is attributable not to any transgression committed by Bardamu but to the stifling heat and boredom

which overwhelm the passengers as the ship enters tropical waters. Nevertheless, all those who have succumbed to the "vile despair," crew members and passengers alike, hold Bardamu responsible.

As the ship continues its journey, the crisis intensifies. Bardamu learns that all kinds of scandalous stories about him are circulating among his shipmates, and everyone seems eager to believe them. First he is accused of sexual procurement, then of pederasty. To these crimes are added cocaine addiction and espionage. All of these accusations are absolutely groundless, not to mention preposterous, but they are nonetheless accepted by all. As Bardamu realizes, "In the end no one doubted that I was the biggest and most intolerable, in fact the *only* out and out blackguard on board" (97), Bardamu understands well the role he is being forced to play:

Through no fault of mine, I had been cast in the indispensable role of the "foul and loathsome villain," shame of the human race, whose presence has been recorded down through the centuries, who is as well known to everyone as God and the Devil, but who, during his passage on this earth, is so polymorphous and evasive as to elude everyone's grasp. (97)

Bardamu also knows the fate of such pariahs: "A sacrifice, and I was to be the victim!" (100).

Finally, Bardamu is confronted by a colonial officer who has been the outspoken leader of his tormentors. Surrounded by the soldier's fellows and unable to escape, he hits upon the one strategy that will save his life. Asked to explain his outrageous behavior, Bardamu denies all the accusations against him and insists that he is not a monstrous outsider but a patriotic Frenchman like the men around him. Encountering this unexpected gesture of solidarity, the crowd is momentarily placated, and Bardamu takes advantage of this respite to jump ship, eventually reaching the African coast and safety.

Although no final sacrifice takes place, this episode clearly contains all the ingredients of a sacrificial crisis which seeks resolution through the designation and immolation of a scapegoat. The heat and close quarters of the ship create tensions and animosities which must find an outlet. Bardamu is a convenient scapegoat because his status as a paying customer sets him apart from the others, sailors and colonial agents whose official status binds them to each other. Besides, as he himself admits, he possesses a "dirty mug."

To justify the crime they are preparing to commit, Bardamu's tormentors accuse him of the worst sorts of antisocial acts which mark him, like Oedipus, as a violator of "Degree," of the fabric of differences that make hierarchy and

social **order** possible. The enormity of the crimes attributed to him, moreover, lend him an **aura** of evil which makes it seem more plausible that he could somehow be responsible for the crisis on board.

Unlike the Theban King, however, Céline's protagonist refuses to accept his culpability and instead manipulates the scapegoating mechanism to save his own life. Later in the novel, he will justify the victimization and scapegoating of others on the grounds that he himself has suffered the same fate. In *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, the spectacle of the victim victimizing is distasteful and disturbing, but it assumes much more ominous, overtly political tones in Céline's notorious anti-Semitic pamphlet, *Bagatelles pour un massacre*.

Published in 1937, *Bagatelles* is a rambling, diffuse diatribe against the Jews and their purported role in the decline of French culture and civilization. The event which occasions Céline's violent polemic is the 1937 Exposition in Paris, an event originally intended to celebrate the successes of the Popular Front government and its Jewish Premier, Leon Blum. According to **Phillip Solomon**,

Céline had supposedly submitted a ballet scenario to the arts committee and had been turned down ostensibly because its author was not one of the favored Jewish artists. "Tu vas voir l'antisemitisme," Céline tells a **friend**, reacting angrily to the rejection. Thus the 1937 Exposition becomes **the point of** departure for Céline's anti-Semitic diatribe, and latter, consequently, a legitimized counter-attack by one of the Exposition's victims. One should, however, note that there is no documentary evidence to substantiate any submission **by Céline to** the Exposition.<sup>4</sup>

Justifying in advance his scapegoating of the Jews by claiming (falsely, apparently) that he himself was first their innocent victim, Céline goes on in *Bagatelles* and in the subsequent pamphlet *Les Beaux Draps* to sketch **out** a scenario which further justifies the victimage of the Jews and which bears all the tell-tale signs of a sacrificial crisis. In *Les Beaux Draps*, the Jews recall a pestilence engulfing the nation and corrupting its values:

**More Jews than** ever in the streets, more Jews than ever in the press, more Jews than ever at the Bar, more Jews **than** ever **at the**

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<sup>4</sup> I would like to thank Philip Solomon for providing me with a copy of his unpublished essay, "Céline on the 1937 *Exposition Internationale* as Jewish Conspiracy."

**Sorbonne, more Jews than ever at the medical school, at the theatre, at the Opera, in industry, in the banks. Paris, France more than ever before turned over... to the Jews, who are more insolent than ever.** (qtd. in Bach, 122. Translation mine)

The Jews are, moreover, held responsible for the decadence and violence of modernity. Practitioners of anal eroticism and other perversions, they are also at the heart of an international conspiracy already responsible for the violent excesses of the Bolshevik revolution. In short, they are responsible for **all the ills** affecting the nation, and their eradication must **be** the first step in **creating** a new French Utopia. Raymond Bach notes that at the end of *Les Beaux Draps*, Céline paints just such a "utopian hygienic vision ... in which family and country have rediscovered **their original harmony**, spontaneity, **and affection. But behind this vision there** is always a **victim: the Jew. For Céline never forgets to insist on the exclusion of the Jew: 'Virez le juif d'abord'" (125).**

**In his** anti-Semitic pamphlets, Céline employs the strategy of victim-turned-victimizer to justify and mobilize the persecution of the Jews in a scenario that could hardly be more Girardian in its contours and in its final outcome. It is no accident that Hitler is called a friend along the way, for the Nazi leader has already begun the type of hygienic exercise in Germany that Céline calls for in France. Moreover, Céline's call to violence is not merely a nihilistic outburst but a plea to reconstitute the community through the victimization of the Jew. In this sense *Bagatelles* and *Les Beaux Draps*, like the work that originally announced their persecutorial strategy, *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, become prime examples of fascist Modernism, which, as Russell Berman argues,

ascribed to the work of art the role of imitating a reactionary revolution. ... No longer the autonomous object of beauty to be contemplated by a passive recipient, it was designed to transform **the status of the recipient in order to reunite him or her with the primal order** of race and the permanence of unquestioned values. (96)

While the strategy of victim turned victimizer which structures the Célinian text takes the Jew as its ultimate target, in Drieu La Rochelle's *Gilles* the final sacrificial victim is not the enemy or enemies of fascism but the fascist protagonist himself, Gilles. Before his sacrifice, or more precisely his self sacrifice in the novel's epilogue, however, Gilles is first the victim of the decadence of his time. His victimizers, moreover, those who have **destroyed**

the nation's identity and vitality, those who have compromised "Degree" in the Girardian sense of the word, comprise a rogue's gallery of the enemies of fascism: Jews, women (and especially Jewish women), homosexuals, leftist artists (above all Drieu's former friends, the Surrealists), and democratic politicians.

The novel's first 500 pages do little more than chronicle in dreary detail the moral and spiritual decline of the young veteran of the First World War and the French nation itself, whose social, political, and cultural fabric are steadily eroded by corrupt Jewish capitalists, irresponsible and effeminate artists and intellectuals, and impotent and cynical politicians. The loss of difference, the collapse or inversion of "natural" hierarchies ultimately results in a generalized outbreak of violence, which for Gilles, at least, offers the one hope of personal as well as communal salvation. At the novel's climax, the fascist leagues take to the streets on the night of February 6, 1934, in an effort to overthrow the government by taking the Chamber of Deputies by storm. Gilles, stirred from his lethargy, rushes to the offices of his politician friend Clarence in order to convince him to join the rioters. For Gilles, what is crucial is to participate in the general conflagration, to embrace the purifying violence in the streets below. He tells Clarence: "Open your offices immediately to recruit combat sections. No manifestoes, no programs, no new parties. Just combat sections . . . With the first section formed," Gilles admonishes, "do anything" (599).<sup>5</sup> The Stavisky Affair that has precipitated the riots, Gilles continues, has revealed to the French the "prodigious infamy of their hearts," (602) and only a cleansing violence that demolishes all political parties, and all other forms of association that sustained the previous hierarchy will make a collective as well as personal renewal possible.

Although Drieu chooses not to emphasize the scapegoating involved in the riots of February 6, 1934, this aspect of the crisis must not be overlooked in interpreting the climactic scene of the novel itself. The riots represented the culmination of a lengthy campaign by the right-wing, anti-Republican press to link the nation's ills to the institution of democracy itself. The Stavisky Affair, which implicated a number of prominent, highly placed Republican politicians through their involvement in financial misdeeds with a Jewish swindler, Sacha Stavisky, provided a pretext for the scapegoating of the republican regime, symbolized by the Chamber of Deputies, target of the rioters' attacks. While the regime was certainly partially responsible for the nation's difficulties, the anti-democratic Right contributed as well to the

<sup>5</sup> All translations of *Gilles* are my own.



nation's woes, and its leaders were **not above reproach when it came to questions** involving personal finances.

**Despite** Gilles's admonishments at the end of Drieu's novel, Clerence refuses to take to the streets, judging the nation too moribund **to** be resuscitated. Gilles himself also fails to plunge into the fray, and the novel closes **with** a failed sacrifice which casts both the hero and the dying nation adrift. Historically, of course, the riots themselves ended in failure when police prevented the rioters from taking the Chamber, but the events deeply affected the nation, provoking a political backlash which culminated in the advent **of the Leftist Popular Front government in** 1936.

**Neither Drieu's** novel nor the adventures of his **hero** end in the aftermath of February 6, however. In an Epilogue whose action takes place several years **later in** Spain during the Civil War, Gilles reappears **with** a new name **and** a new identity. He **is** now known as 'Walter' and **he** works for a powerful, **secret** organization which seeks to establish fascism's hegemony worldwide. **Once again,** the enemy is modern decadence and the culprits **are** Jews, homosexuals, and fascism's other political enemy, Marxism. In the Epilogue, however, the cathartic sacrifice does not fail to occur. Trapped with other **pro-Franco** forces in a bull ring, Gilles opts not to fall back with the others **but** to stay and welcome his own death in the most sacred place of violent sacrifice, the *Corrida*.

In Drieu's *Gilles*, then, the sacrificial victims are **not** fascism's enemies **but** the fascist hero himself. Unlike Céline's Jewish **victims**, however, Gilles **is** sanctified in death and his demise is intended not merely to promote the renaissance of a single nation but to found a new international fascist cultural **order**. **It** is important to note that Drieu's novel was published in 1939, when the *Anschluss*, the Munich Accords, the Hitler-Stalin Pact and the close ties of the Axis powers made fascism appear invincible. *Gilles*, in fact, takes us beyond the Célinian text of persecution and proposes instead a new foundational myth not at all dissimilar to those Girard analyzes in *The Scapegoat*. History has been transcended, as evidenced in the fact that in the Epilogue Gilles serves a supranational fascist organization which, as Mary **Jean** Green has pointed out, never existed (236-7). Moreover, as befitting his final apotheosis, Gilles has been given a new identity. He has renounced **those** vices which had tied him to the decadence of his times **and the** desires **and drives that** confirmed his humanity: worldly success and women no longer interest **him**.

**The** collapse of the Nazi Regime and its allies in 1945 makes Drieu's **ambitious** exercise seem ludicrous today, but it should not obscure the fact **that Drieu, like Céline,** understood only too well the workings of the **scape-**

goating mechanism and attempted to mobilize it in his writings to further the cause of fascism. While we can remain comfortably detached from and dismissive of Drieu's fascist mythmaking, however, we would do well to heed the example of Céline's Bardamu in our efforts to understand the strategies of fascism's descendants in France today. Jean-Marie Le Pen's crude scapegoating of North African and other immigrants certainly provides an obvious example, but the victim-turned-victimizer strategy has recently been mobilized in a context which plumbs the depths of the nation's historical memory and which effectively unsettled the conscience of those much too intellectually and morally sophisticated to be affected by the superficial demagoguery of Le Pen.

In his meditation on the 1980s trial of the former Gestapo chief in Occupied Lyons, Klaus Barbie, Alain Finkielkraut devotes a good deal of attention to the defense strategies adopted by Barbie's lawyer, Jacques Vergès. Rather than allow his client to be cast in the role of victimizer, Vergès sought to turn the tables by painting Barbie as the victim of a European White\Israeli-Jewish conspiracy which itself was guilty of innumerable atrocities in any number of contexts against the nonwhite races. On his defense team, Vergès was careful to include representatives of these nonwhite races: co-council for the defense included a Congolese and an Algerian lawyer. Vergès's strategy was of course to form a holy alliance composed of the former Nazi, now the innocent victim of an evil conspiracy, and the peoples of the Third World, Arab, Black African, and Asiatic alike, around the symbolic body of their European and Israeli tormentors.

The strategy was rich in ironies as well as disturbing implications and potentialities. Among the ironies was the fact that the former Nazi was defended by members of the very races that Nazism dismissed as subhuman. Moreover, the spectacle of the trial and of Vergès's defense tactic could not fail to exacerbate racial tensions in France and elsewhere by simplifying the complex issues at stake and reducing the trial to a Manichaean conflict between good and evil. Finally, in raising the specter of European and especially French atrocities in their former colonies and comparing them to Nazi war crimes, Vergès sought to deny the significance and uniqueness of the Holocaust and strip the notion of crimes against humanity as legally defined of all specificity and meaning. These last consequences of Vergès's strategy have proven the most insidious. If the crimes committed by the democracies are no different from those committed by the Nazis, then we are no different from the Nazis. We are perhaps their brothers after all.

In its latest manifestations, then, French fascist discourse mobilizes the victimage mechanism not so much to create national cultures or promote

specific political agendas but to efface them, to establish a worldwide fraternity of victimizers-turned-persecutors and to orchestrate scapegoatings on a global scale. The new fascist order, so to speak, is to be built not around the anachronistic cult of a particular leader or even the persecution of a specific racial minority. Instead, it seeks to exploit the capacity of ethnic, racial, national, and religious groups, as well as of individual human beings, to turn the experience of oppression or persecution against their erstwhile tormentors and create victims in turn. In this postmodern age, fascism forsakes its institutional and political base to gain an ever wider foothold in the human heart.

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