

# Arts & Letters

## FILM

[*There Will Be Blood*]

### The Oilman Bowls Alone

By Steve Sailer

NO MOVIE OF 2007 sounded more promising than “There Will Be Blood,” which stars the titanic Daniel Day-Lewis in a loose adaptation of Upton Sinclair’s 1927 *roman-à-clef* about prospector Edward L. Doheny, *Oil!*

In 1893, Doheny sank the first oil well in Los Angeles, digging 155 feet by hand. His oil discoveries all over California and Mexico (where he employed a private army of 6,000), enabled him to give his son the most imposing house in California south of William Randolph Hearst’s San Simeon Greystone, a 55-room Beverly Hills mansion with a private bowling alley, where the last scene of “There Will Be Blood” was filmed.

During the Harding administration, however, Doheny, a Democrat (but an open-minded one), became entangled in the Teapot Dome scandal. After receiving a no-bid contract to drill on Navy lands, he sent his son with a “loan” of \$100,000 in cash to Secretary of the Interior Albert B. Fall.

Outraged, the muckraking socialist Sinclair wrote a verbose but well-researched novel about oil, “the black and cruel demon,” leavened with some surprisingly affectionate depictions of the old rascal. If Sinclair had waited two more years, though, he would have had

the perfect climax. In 1929, having been acquitted of conspiracy, Doheny was still facing trial on bribing Fall when his son and his son’s secretary, both potential witnesses, died at Greystone in a murder-suicide. Who had murdered whom? The police quickly blamed the secretary, and the newspapers went along.

The Doheny affair was not forgotten, however, by a Los Angeles oil industry executive named Raymond Chandler. When he drank himself out of a job in 1932, Chandler tried writing detective fiction. The ambiguous Greystone killings became the archetype for Philip Marlowe’s cases, with Doheny Sr. perhaps the inspiration for the dying General Sternwood who hires Marlowe in *The Big Sleep*.

It would be hard to go wrong with source material this vivid, and harder still with Daniel Day-Lewis as the oilman. This is only the eighth movie Day-Lewis has appeared in since he won the 1989 Best Actor Oscar for “My Left Foot.” There he played an angry Irish slum lad so disabled by cerebral palsy that he couldn’t speak, who became a famous painter and writer using the only part of his body he could control.

Day-Lewis claims he felt like a discriminated-against outsider growing up in England because of his half-Irish and half-Jewish ancestry. In reality, his Protestant Irish father, C. Day-Lewis, was Poet Laureate of England, while his Jewish grandfather, Sir Michael Balcon, was the head of England’s most beloved movie studio, Ealing, when Alec Guinness made his comedies. Day-Lewis’s combination of English privileged-class panache and American method-acting intensity has made him one of the most formidable of all contemporary screen presences.

And in the hands of the Bard of Studio City, writer-director Paul Thomas Anderson, maker of such memorable San Fernando Valley-obsessed films as “Boogie Nights” and “Punch-Drunk Love,” “There Will Be Blood” had the potential to displace “Chinatown” as the Southern California period masterpiece.

Despite a handful of great scenes, the strangely apolitical “There Will Be Blood” turns out to be just another movie about movies. Anderson entrances the critics with countless references to film-school staples such as “Citizen Kane.” For example, Day-Lewis’s mid-Atlantic accent is lifted from John Huston’s villainous tycoon in “Chinatown,” which in turn points to Huston’s classic about greedy prospectors, “Treasure of the Sierra Madre.” The ominous, annoying orchestral score by Radiohead guitarist Johnny Greenwood is nearly identical to György Ligeti’s buzzing insect music used by Stanley Kubrick in “2001.” Indeed, by the (perhaps intentionally) comic conclusion, the oilman has devolved into “2001’s” ape-man, clubbing his rival’s head in, although with a bowling pin rather than a bone.

Regrettably, there’s not enough to entertain the non-cinephile during the abstract, glum, and static first two hours. Have you ever had that nightmare where you are back in college on final exam day, but you haven’t read a word all semester? I wonder if Anderson similarly woke up and realized he had made 120 minutes of a movie starring the world’s greatest actor but had barely given him anything to do. Whatever the explanation, the last 40 minutes consist of Day-Lewis overacting shamelessly. It’s silly, but at least it’s lively. ■

Rated a soft R, mostly for art house cred.

## BOOKS

[*Liberal Fascism: The Secret History of the American Left, From Mussolini to the Politics of Meaning*, Jonah Goldberg, Doubleday, 496 pages]

# Goldberg's Trivial Pursuit

By Austin W. Bramwell

NOT WITHOUT REASON was Jonah Goldberg's *Liberal Fascism* widely expected to be a bad book. As many predicted from the title, Goldberg does not content himself with rebuking those who call anyone who disagrees with them a fascist. Instead, he invents reasons of his own for calling anyone who disagrees with Jonah Goldberg a fascist. *Liberal Fascism* confirms anew George Orwell's remark—cited by Goldberg without irony—that fascism has no meaning today other than “something not desirable.”

Expecting an unkind reception, Goldberg has packed his book with caveats. “I do not believe liberals are evil, villainous or bigoted,” he writes. “I have not written a book about how all liberals are Nazis or fascists. ... Liberals today are not responsible for what their forefathers believed.” Nevertheless, liberals must “account” for their history and “live in a house of distinctly fascist architecture.” Liberal economics are a “fascist bargain” and Hillary Clinton's *It takes a Village* explicates “the liberal fascist agenda.” Liberals have “totalitarian temptations residing in their hearts.” Patient exegetes can determine for themselves which claims Goldberg is actually making and which he means to take back.

In the meantime, one can make out three reasons for calling liberals the true fascists. First, Goldberg points out that liberalism and fascism have many

elements in common. Both fascists and liberals favor a minimum wage, an expansive social safety net, heavy regulation of industry, and redistributive taxation, but stop short of advocating the abolition of private property. Both scorn constitutional limits on government, indulge in economic populism, and see the working classes as their natural constituencies. Both distrust bourgeois values and traditional religion. On these points and others, Goldberg observes, not only do liberalism and fascism agree, but they reject the ideology of the American conservative movement.

That liberalism and fascism happen to overlap is not surprising. One can find just as many similarities between fascism and movement conservatism: both assail communism, exaggerate security threats, rationalize wars of aggression, and uphold nationalism (what sentimentalists call patriotism) and its symbols (flags, founding myths, worship of national heroes). Nothing in logic compels the ideas of liberalism, fascism, or movement conservatism to cohere into a system. On the contrary, creative theorists can mix sundry political ideas as freely as the ingredients of a cocktail. Given the vast range of questions to which competing ideologies purport to provide answers, the real surprise would be if any two ideologies had nothing in common at all.

Goldberg nonetheless sees ideologies as discrete wholes. He makes much of his discovery, for example, that the Nazis supported organic farming and animal rights and even goes so far as to admonish us to “grapple with the fact that we've seen this sort of thing before.” Readers can spare themselves the energy. That Nazism and contemporary liberalism both promote healthy living is as meaningless a finding as that bloody marys and martinis may both be made with gin. Repeatedly, Goldberg fails to recognize a *reductio ad absurdum*. He tells us that Himmler bemoaned the Christian persecution of witches, just like Wiccan feminists do today, that Hitler once described his doctrine as “reality-based,” just like today's progressives

describe theirs, and that Mussolini was quite smart “by the standards of liberal intellectuals today.” In no case does Goldberg uncover anything more ominous than a coincidence.

Often the parallels between liberalism and fascism prove only that they use the rhetorical strategies available to them. John F. Kennedy's successors did not need obscure socialist theorists to tell them about the power of myth to unite their followers. The concept of a “third way” recurs in any ideology that claims to combine the best of various alternatives. Conspiracy theories run amok not just among Nazis and anti-Bush leftists but across the political spectrum, doubtless because they have more cognitive appeal than the counterintuitive models needed to understand how the modern world actually works. Goldberg's own tendency to blame the world's ills on a handful of evil philosophers from Rousseau to Heidegger is itself a kind of conspiracy theory. That does not make Goldberg an unwitting Nazi.

In elaborating liberalism's similarities to fascism, Goldberg shows a near superstitious belief in the power of taxonomy. He devotes a whole chapter to proving that Nazism was left-wing. Hitler was a revolutionary, Hitler was anti-business, Hitler was a socialist: therefore Hitler was a leftist. Very well, but clearly one can also place Hitler on the Right. An ideology does not come under some kind of curse just because it is put in the same category as Hitler's. Nor by lumping Hitler in with one's political opponents can one somehow burden them with his crimes. Other than scandalizing one's enemies, little is accomplished by applying the categories “Right” and “Left” to Hitlerism.

Goldberg's second argument for “liberal fascism,” presented as the official thesis of the book, is that liberalism and fascism share the same intellectual heritage. Like others who look to intellectual history for insight, Goldberg resorts to genealogical metaphor: liberalism is the “daughter” of progressivism, which is the “sister movement of fascism.” Thus liberalism today has