
BOOK REVIEWS

LAWRENCE DENNIS

Black voice in the right wing wilderness

Dennis, Lawrence. *The Coming American Fascism*. 1936. Introd. W. A. Carto. Newport Beach: Noontide Press, 1993.

Dennis, Lawrence. *The Dynamics of War and Revolution*. 1940. Introd. James J. Martin. Newport Beach: Noontide Press, 1980.

Dennis, Lawrence, and Maximilian St. George. *A Trial on Trial: The Great Sedition Trial of 1944*. National Civil Rights Committee, 1946.

Horne, Gerald. *The Color of Fascism: Lawrence Dennis, Racial Passing, and the Rise of Right-Wing Extremism in the United States*. New York: New York UP, 2006.

Operational Thinking for Survival. Colorado Springs: Ralph Myles, 1969.

Lawrence Dennis (1893–1977) is a forgotten figure in American intellectual history. He was an articulate isolationist, an independent political and economic commentator, an advisor to Col. Lindbergh and the America First Committee, which hoped to keep the U.S. out of a world war. This work made him an enemy of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who put Dennis on trial with two dozen other right-wing opponents to his policies, in “The Great Sedition Trial” of 1944. Although the trial was inconclusive and stopped with the death of the judge, Dennis has been forever after tainted as a “fascist.” Perhaps he was. In his 1936 book, *The Coming American Fascism*, he prophesied fascism in some form was the future of the United States. Dennis believed that the Depression proved that economic liberalism was dead and managed economies inevitable. He called for nationalization of banks, monopolies and schools, and generally, for a country administered by an “elite” imbued with ideals of national service rather than the dreams of private profit at public expense. But *The Coming American Fascism* is not a hate book. Dennis was not a racist and he was no extremist either; the mark of right-wing extremism is conspiracy theory, which Dennis rejected. Dennis was too savvy for that; for him, politics was a power struggle between elites, not the unfolding of a secret plan. The world could not be dominated by a single group with a comprehensive program, so there are no scapegoats (if Dennis takes shots at any special group it is lawyers), nor does the book make a fetish of military virtue.

Dennis was no Nazi; *The Coming American Fascism* is not *Mein Kampf* for Americans. He argued for an American fascism that was “scientific and pragmatic,” flexible and open to an elite of talent. He does argue for a single party state and for “the logic and inevitability of a disciplined party organization for effective and responsible action” (CAF 298–9). All in all, he has as much in common with Alexander Hamilton as with Mussolini, and except for his Hobbesian emphasis on the ruthless struggle for national survival, little in common with Adolf Hitler.

In short, Dennis is that rare animal, a right-wing intellectual. Now, thanks to Professor Horne, we learn that Lawrence Dennis was black and only passing as white—something once known but forgotten. Born in Atlanta, he began life as Lonnie Dennis, and gained fleeting fame as a child evangelist, touring the U.S. and Europe with his visibly black mother. It is probably symptomatic of my racial and political naiveté that I was stunned that “the brains of American fascism,” as Harold Ickes called him, was black. Besides, the picture of Dennis on the cover and frontispiece of Gerald Horne’s study shows a manifestly white man with a craggy face and rock-like chin who looks like he could have been the model for New Hampshire’s late lamented state symbol, “The Old Man of the Mountain.” Reading Dennis as black changes utterly the meaning of his anti-liberal, openly elitist message.

Graduated from Exeter and Harvard, Dennis distinguished himself as an army officer in World War I. After the war he served the State Department in Romania, Haiti, Honduras, and Nicaragua, so he saw American imperialism first hand and was not impressed. By his own account, he was “the principle American charge d’affaires in Nicaragua in August 1926, who, at the request of the State Department, sent the telegram asking the Marines to come back to ‘protect American life and property’” (DWR 108) and so crush Nicaraguan hopes of political independence. In 1927 Dennis left government service after complaining about U.S. policy in Latin America and went to work for Wall Street as an agent for the Seligman bank. Assigned to Peru, he saw enough to convince him that a market crash was immanent. Specifically, Peru was flooded with loans that could never hope to be repaid. When Dennis made his views known in print, Seligman chose not to believe him, but when the crash came and Dennis was vindicated, he was able to parlay his apparent prophecy into a life as a public intellectual, writing for *The New Republic* and other magazines, and testifying before Congressional Committees on economic matters. He was especially proud of two articles on the banking crisis in *The Nation*, written in 1933, that showed the correct way out of the slump via government spending. Dennis made then the still heretical proposal that if the government could command spending for war, it could just as easily command it for welfare programs—clearly he was not your garden-variety rightist (see OTFS 189–198). Indeed, Horne believes that Dennis hoped to become one of Roosevelt’s Brain Trusters. When this failed to materialize, Dennis found himself, to use his own preferred terms, as one of the “out” elite, as opposed to one of the “ins.”

If Dennis looks like what Gerald Horne calls a “melanin deficient” person, he shows in this first biographical study of Dennis that this multilingual Harvard graduate, U.S. Army officer, diplomat and Wall St. insider, was indeed “black” by the perverse legal codes of the United States, which means that he should be considered one of the important black public intellectuals of the twentieth century. Labeled a fascist, which Horne’s unfortunate title only reinforces, Dennis has been consigned to the brimming right-wing “crackpot” bin of American history. He deserves much better. He deserves to be read. *The Color of Fascism*

was so interesting—and so frustratingly short on critical detail—that I found Dennis’s 1940 book *The Dynamics of War and Revolution* (the only one of Dennis’s books in my college library) and read it. That book shows that Lawrence Dennis was a brilliant public intellectual. His book is more lively and better written than Walter Lippman’s *The Good Society* (1937) to which it probably responds, or Thurman Arnold’s wry study of liberal ideology, *The Folklore of Capitalism* (1937) to which it nods. His first book, *Is Capitalism Doomed?* (1932) seems truly out of print; but his other books, including the one that made him notorious, *The Coming American Fascism* (1936), are still available. As I found on reading it, “fascism” in that book does not mean Hitler or Mussolini, but any “strong authoritarian executive state” (102) willing the national good through central economic planning. In fact, in Dennis’s account, all managed economies, from Italy to the USSR, including the U.S. under the New Deal, were socialist. Finally, the late *Operational Thinking for Survival* (1969) is a pragmatic “guide to useful thinking about the near future” in the space age, “the age of permanent war crisis.” This book is little known—even less than the privately printed *Trial on Trial* of 1946. It is so obscure that Horne himself seems unaware of its existence, though an article by Keith Stimely available on the web marks it as an important late work, and stresses “operational thinking” as a crucial key-term for Dennis.¹

That the late Stimely was interested in Dennis should have clued me in. When the most recent reprints of Dennis arrived, I saw that they were undertaken by Willis Carto’s Noon-tide Press, which means that Dennis has become canonical on the extreme right. Given his idiosyncratic views (not fervently anti-communist, disillusioned with Christianity, pro-Third World) this is surprising to me. But, the “Lawrence Dennis Institute,” which bills Dennis and its ideology as populist-progressive, seems to be the heir to the now defunct Liberty Lobby. Dennis deserves a better fate. Perhaps now that his racial filiations are known, rather than a “right wing extremist” as Horne still wants him to be, Dennis will find his place in the disenchanting anti-liberal black company of Thomas Sowell, Clarence Thomas, and George Schuyler.

Given Horne’s own left politics, it is not surprising that he is not much interested in Dennis’s political rehabilitation or in him as a public intellectual. Horne, a prolific writer who has already contributed a left interpretation of the Civil Rights movement in his biography of Ben Davis,² still feels the need to reassure his audience that he himself “is a dark-skinned person with Socialist views.” He is frankly dismayed by Dennis’s political ideas. Instead, he wants “to try to shed light on how Jim Crow, an ideology that was a close cousin of fascism, may have driven Dennis to political extremities and infected his thinking” (x–xi). To Horne, Dennis is merely an eccentric and racially damaged African-American thinker whose unique subject-position gave him dark insights into the so-called “good society” of the high priests of liberalism like Lippman. Yet, Horne presents no evidence that Dennis is in any sense an “extremist.” In his own mind, he was a dissident “theorist,” not an ideologue. His books bear him out.

Theorist or not, once the U.S. entered World War II, efforts were made to determine if Dennis was a traitor because of his extensive German contacts. He was put under FBI surveillance and in 1942 his papers were seized. Despite this hostile scrutiny, the worst that can be said of Dennis is that in the Thirties he admired Hitler as a dynamic leader and saw in fascism an answer to the bankrupt “liberal consensus” that underwrote capitalism in the 19th century. As a free-floating intellectual with patrician tastes, he was often short

of cash, so his *Weekly Foreign Letter*, which tried to reach "elite" subscribers with Dennis's isolationist message, apparently "did receive some contributions from the German Embassy" (xi). Unfortunately, Horne leaves it unclear if these subsidies continued after Germany declared war on the U.S., Dec 10, 1941. Also, Dennis was "a frequent visitor" to the German Embassy in the Thirties and was invited to the Nuremberg party rally of 1936. He met Hitler and Mussolini, and, according to Horne, had a high opinion of Hitler's inner-circle: Goering, Goebbels, and even Rosenberg (seemingly because the arch-ideologue Rosenberg was a "theorist" like himself).

Finally, FBI files studied by Horne reveal that, during 1938–1940, Dennis had frequent meetings with Dr. Friedrich Auhagen, a one-time Columbia Professor of German who was a Nazi agent, but Horne says nothing about any meetings after the U.S. entered the war. Presumably there were none. Since Dennis was an articulate spokesman for isolationism, Auhagen would have been interested in encouraging Dennis; he even hired him to speak at his "American Fellowship Forum," but that was in April 1939, months before open hostilities in Europe. Dennis also wrote for *The Reader's Digest* when it was soft on fascism, but as he was never charged with treason, it is likely there was no evidence of any. Altogether, these disturbing contacts with Germany cloud Dennis's legacy. As Horne writes, "Dennis, of course, sought to deny what seemed obvious to many others—that he was at the center of a vast right-wing conspiracy" CAF 69). But Horne fails to clearly outline any such conspiracy. Whatever the case was, Dennis's "fascism" is sophisticated and buttressed by extensive economic, not racial arguments. Given his covert racial situation, Dennis could not have been a simple black nationalist, (like several black "fuehrers" active in Harlem at the time). His post-war writing, with his frequent and ironic use of Lothrop Stoddard's "rising tide of color" shows a keen interest in the third world and an anti-imperialism consistent with his isolationism of the late 1930s.

Dennis was attracted to celebrities, so it's easy to see why he cottoned to the impressive Lindbergh, who was transported by Nazi spectacle. Yet, despite some affinities with America's Aryan *wunderkind*, for whom he wrote some speeches, Dennis seems to have been skeptical, even contemptuous of *Bund*-style marching societies and mass politics. Although visible on stage at America First rallies, Dennis preferred to work behind the scenes. He was good friends with Col. Truman Smith, Lindbergh's political advisor and arch-isolationist, and Lindbergh advisor Congressman George Tinkham subscribed to his publications. Unlike Lindbergh, Dennis never expressed anti-Semitism in his writings that I have seen. He denies anti-Semitism in his searching polemical analysis of his own trial: *The Trial on Trial: The Great Sedition Trial of 1944*. There is no trace of it in *The Dynamics of War and Revolution*, the one book by Dennis introduced in the trial. (Curiously, according to Dennis, *The Coming American Fascism*, which is a pro-fascist book, was not.) The government witness against him also conceded that *Dynamics* "is certainly not a Nazi book"; instead, he compared it with Spengler's *The Decline of the West* (TT 138). Though flattering, the comparison is apt only in that the books are both deeply pessimistic and conservative. Spengler believed in "Prussianism," not Nazism; in Bismark, not Hitler. Dennis's writing has none of Spengler's Wagnerian power-chords and stifling Romanticism. Dennis's is a classic and cynical style, almost "French," with a turn towards epigram: "Bismark once said that politics is the science of the possible. Ethics is clearly the science of the desirable, which literally, can mean anything possible or impossible" (DWR 25).

It's important to see that Dennis endorses "a desirable fascism" because he feels we must come to terms with reality, not be blinded by the ethical idealism of so-called democracy. He believes that might is right and always has been. "Democracy," he writes, "is valid only in so far as it postulates and expresses in effective action the *might* of the people" (my emphasis CAF 143). Since it does not, in fact, do this, we need to move on. He holds no brief for any single leader, but he is for the rule of dynamic elites "willing the national good" as Ezra Pound would say. And he sees that in reality, elites *do* rule, though increasingly and therefore hypocritically, in the name of "the people." History is enacted by conflicts between "in" elites and the "outs" trying to get back in. Beneath this political turbulence the common people are fed whatever it is expedient for them to know.

Horne believes that Dennis took this dim view of democracy because of Jim Crow. He recognized the pliability of the people, their susceptibility to sentiment and difficulty in distinguishing the common good from "minority interests." As he wrote about the Depression in the 1930s, "The role of education in our present crisis is to make the masses susceptible as they never were before to propaganda and demagogic manipulation. The greater the number of people who can vote and read, the greater the irrationality, the greater the conflict of minority interests and the greater the anarchy in the political and economic processes under a system of parliamentary democracy. The people can rule with rationality and success only through a single leader, party and governing agency" (DWR 125). Just to be clear, these minority interests as one can see in reading *The Coming American Fascism*, are simply "interest groups" and their powerful lobbies; is it not a code word for Jews (CAF 97–99).

Dennis's cynicism about how public power serves private interests is why he's worth reading today. He notes "once good advertising technique becomes good political technique a country is ready for a Dr. Goebbels" (CAF130)—or a Karl Rove. His unsparing critique of liberalism is obviously informed by the history of slavery. He scorns the "immunity liberalism gives to property but not to human life." Liberalism also "means that long wars result in the greater concentration of wealth, as a result of war financing by borrowing from the rich, whereas" in the past under monarchies and in future under fascism, "long wars would result in a drastic equalization of wealth if the funds needed were taken by levy" from the rich, or rich corporations (CAF 135). Dennis's insight helps explain why no windfall profit taxes have been levied (or even considered) against big oil and the private military industry in our long war in Iraq from which they have profited so outrageously.

Dennis looks to Germany, Italy, the USSR, and his own United States to see where demagogic rule via "good advertising technique" is in fact happening. FDR's rush to world war, despite fervent election year promises to the contrary in 1940, was driven by the reality that capitalism has failed, and that only war could save liberalism as well as the British Empire. This crusade would, in Dennis's view, only hasten the onset of some kind of national socialism—that is, managed economies by nationalist elites. He thought that the continuation of liberalism under war conditions could only result in sham elections and, as his own experience would bear out, show trials. It took on characteristics of our war-time ally the USSR, rather than Hitler's Germany.

In the event, Dennis proved prophetic. The half of Europe that was not swallowed by the Soviets after the war went forward under more or less social-national economies,

with nationalized railroads, health care, and major industries, although the German banking system under the Bundesbank (modeled on the Federal Reserve Bank of the United States) maintained a liberal façade. Keynesian economics saved capitalism as the Cold War militarized the economy and society. In the words of economist Meghnad Desai, the post-war period was “the golden age of national capitalism.”³

It was Dennis’s curious subject position as a passer, Horne argues, that taught him to be a cynic, a realist and a pessimist. For Dennis, history was force, liberal ideology its velvet glove. Having experienced the U.S. as a black southerner, Dennis saw “democracy” as the cover story of imperialism, with the south as a classic economic colony, in some ways more socially and racially backward even than Haiti, Honduras, and Nicaragua. No wonder Dennis was unimpressed with liberalism. His State Department service in the Caribbean and Latin America in the 1920’s gave him an inside look at American imperialism at its most flagrant and most racist. Thus, he saw American “interventionism” for what it was—coercive aggression to protect private investments abroad paid for by American taxpayers. Liberalism, for Dennis, is nothing more than the ideology of the British Empire, eagerly embraced by the United States, which depended on “free-markets” and the gold standard to extract profit from its possessions. Freedom, in liberal terms, is nothing more than the free-play of capital—exactly what “spreading freedom” means to the Bush regime. “Liberal economics is essentially a system of propaganda” (CAF 35) he wrote, dependant on uniquely 19th century conditions, free land, cheap labor and superior military technology. It could not survive long in the 20th century.

Dennis admired Frederick Turner and realized that the “closing of the frontier,” the relative success of the labor movement, and the erosion of European technological superiority meant the end of capitalism as a dynamic system. In the 20th century it would need to be “rationalized” and managed by a pragmatic and strong-willed elite. In the 1930s, Dennis saw that this was already happening in the fascist countries and in the USSR. Meanwhile, even Britain had ditched the cant of ‘free-markets’ and opted for tariff protection, thereby “admitting defeat in foreign trade. . . and spelling the doom of a liberal British imperialism” (CAF 45). There was only one term for any non-communist alternative to liberalism in the polarized, politicized 1930’s—fascism. Dennis was attracted to economic self-sufficiency (autarky) and he thought that “men were better off in the army than in the bread-line” (CAF 281) but as an anti-imperialist, he thought armies were for defense, not aggression. Besides in the twentieth century there were no more “easy wars of conquest.” Instead of foreign wars Dennis proposed “pyramid building”—that is, public works projects, “capital investments by the state that would never be created by private capital or enterprise for a profit or for interest.” In economic terms these “non-productive” public investments nonetheless could have real social value. These could be public monuments, or workers’ housing (DWR 220–235). Dennis hoped that such investments would be made to benefit the public; in any event, we got the space-race, the invasion of the moon, and the Cold War. These are 20th century analogues to the pyramids: perfectly useless, perfectly spell-binding, conjuring both the dynamism and discipline Dennis had in mind back in 1940 but without the social benefits.

Horne’s focus on Dennis’s constant reminders of the anomalous plight of “the Negro” in these supposedly free states shows unequivocally that Dennis was preoccupied with

his racial secret. He passed successfully his whole life; although some guessed at his race, he never admitted it, not even to his family. Horne's reading of *The Dynamics of War and Revolution* stresses Dennis's recurrent references to America's racial hypocrisy; "In this book he poured out like molten lava the pent-up frustrations of a man who was furious with society that had compelled him to make his family disappear in order to advance" . . . Dennis did not hesitate to point out that . . . the United States was a limited *herrenvolk* democracy" (Horne 90). Hiding his racial secret, Dennis's sense of intellectual superiority must have been flattered by the blindness of others around him; but his obsessive need to name-drop says a lot about his social insecurity. Certainly, his position colored his sharp, almost Voltairean irony. In *The Trial on Trial*, Dennis goes out of his way to mock the government's inept and quasi-scientific method of deciding what Nazi propaganda was by listing its characteristics: ". . . one does not need fourteen characteristics any more than one needs fourteen characteristics to differentiate whites from Negroes. Three characteristics will suffice in the case of Negroes: color of skin, texture of hair and thickness of lips" (T on T 359). Reading this assuming that Dennis was a white fascist, we cringe; reading him as a black writer we can be amused by this covert act of resistance and how Dennis must have cackled inwardly writing it.

Despite claims to discuss "racial passing" Horne has nothing very deep to say about it, nothing like the searching *New Yorker* essay by Henry Louis Gates on Anatole Broyard's double life of a decade ago.⁴ Horne's introduction gives us a brief standard history of racial passing in the United States and makes the case that those who pass may well become conservatives as a defensive screen against inquiries about ancestry. Passing, for Horne, simply means the opportunistic abandonment of one's family and the requisite loneliness (Horne 25); it is more sentimental loss than political statement. A rambling writer at best, Horne insists on dwelling on the sorrows of Dennis's supposed alienation from his mother in paragraph after paragraph. But what Dennis's feelings were, or even if his mother was alive, are pure speculation. Since he never discussed it, nothing is known of how Dennis made his decision to pass, what agonies it might have cost him, or even how, at age twenty, he inserted himself into Philips Exeter Academy, presumably posing as a much younger person, as well as a white. For Dennis's early life, Horne is forced to rely on FBI files—hardly an archive likely to be full of insight into the motivations of a nominally "black" person making the huge existential leap from one "race" to another. However, he does point out that Dennis's "isolationism" was not only a political position, but "also, points ironically to his social position." Yet, however distanced from his black roots, Dennis seems anything but socially isolated; he seems to have been accepted fully as a member of the "elite," with prominent, moneyed friends, including Philip Johnson the architect, Sterling Morton the salt magnate, the Lindberghs and many others on his mailing list for "*The Weekly Foreign Letter*" (1938–1942) and later, "*The Appeal to Reason*," which he started in 1946 and which ran, apparently, into the 1950s.

I have to say "apparently" above, because Horne's limited interest in Dennis's ideas, except as they conform to his own beliefs and his one-sided, though valuable, presentation of Dennis as a black thinker, means that his account of the evolution of Dennis's thought is scattered across his text. One symptom is a lack of a bibliography; he gives us no dates, no history of Dennis's publications. And, as mentioned, he seems quite unaware of Dennis's late book, *Operational Thinking for Survival*.

A public intellectual is a philosopher of the present, so Dennis's thought evolved in response to public events, even as his assumptions remained little changed: the dynamic period of capitalism ended with the foreclosure of frontier conditions, liberalism is purely ideological, fascism of one kind or another inevitable. *The Dynamics of War and Revolution* is a substantial work of revisionist history and was so taken by contemporaries as Horne shows by quoting reviews. But Horne does not stress, as Stimely does, respectful contemporary treatments of Dennis in the work of such intellectuals as Alan Pendleton Grimes, David Spitz, and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. I would add that the Marxist historian Lewis Corey quotes Dennis's early work approvingly in *The Decline of American Capitalism* (1934). Horne does point us to comments by Ezra Pound on Dennis. On reading articles by him in *The Examiner* (March 1939), "the poet laureate of fascism" (Horne xv) was inspired to produce a laudatory if rather incoherent radio speech, urging Americans to "read him," but is clear that, isolated in Rapallo, the poet's acquaintance with Dennis's work was very limited. Still, Horne uses Pound's equivocal endorsement to underline Horne's right-wing filiations with his "erstwhile comrade" and to insinuate that even though "some of [Dennis's] ideas did not seem to dovetail with those on the ultraright" like Pound, and even though he constantly asserted that he was not a fascist, Dennis, in Horne's reading, "was 'passing' or seeking to position himself advantageously" for the inevitable fascist regime to come (Horne xvi). In short, he argues that Dennis was a cynical opportunist. This is just one of many moments when the reader feels Horne's deep disapproval of Dennis as a passer; he sees Dennis as a kind of opportunistic race traitor; it can't be admitted that for the "melanin deficient" but legally "black" person, race need not be a law of nature, but as Gates points out about Broyard, "an elective affinity."

Horne's political—and dare I say racial?—discomfort with Dennis may explain why he doesn't analyze Dennis's work in its own terms. When Horne approves of an idea he often suggests that it was "borrowed from the Black Left." Since, as Ralph Ellison has taught so well, the Black Left was far from independent at the time Dennis was writing—it was more or less an agency of the Comintern—one wonders just what Horne means. Altogether, Dennis's work is a serious vision of a new kind of America; it asks to be read thoughtfully. To repeat, this is not a vision of hate, or of reaction, as the term "fascism" suggests, but a prophetic vision of a possible future, which materialized, instead, as the fascistic National Security State. The whole of Dennis's work deserve to be read and studied by those interested in American intellectual history and, as Horne shows, by those interested in African-American history as well. Perhaps Horne's pioneering book will serve to recall this forgotten black outsider back from the kitchen to sit with his peers at the dining room table of American intellectual history. It is far more useful to put Dennis in conversation with W.E.B. DuBois and Amiri Baraka than with Mussolini and Hitler.

—Alec Marsh

NOTES

1. All Dennis's books, except *Is Capitalism Doomed?* can be bought online. For an account of Stimely, see Kevin Coogan, *Dreamer of the Day: Francis Parker Yockey and the Postwar Fascist International*. Auto-media 1999 p. 525–6. Stimely's impressive essay is called "Lawrence Dennis and the Frontier Thesis

for American Capitalism" (1986). Published 2001. <http://www.charlesmartelsociety.org/toq/voll1no1/ks-dennis.html> p. 5, 23n.

2. *Black Liberation/ Red Scare: Ben Davis and the Communist Party*. Newark: U of Delaware P. 1994.
3. See *Marx's Revenge: The Resurgence of Capitalism and the Death of Statist Socialism*. Verso. London. 2002, pp. 216–234.
4. Now collected in Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "The Passing of Anatole Broyard." In *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man*. New York: Random House, 1997. Pp. 180–214.