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Seward Collins as Provocateur: A New View on Collins's Fascism and the *American Review*

Abstract: This paper explores a new view of Seward Collins, the publisher of the 1930s journal known as the *American Review*—as a provocateur par excellence. Normally labeled a “fascist” in historical literature, this paper tries to understand the nuances behind this position. Collins's supposed fascism presents a historical and epistemological problem for historians, and the paper proposes changing Collins's label to that of provocateur.

Two months after President Franklin Delano Roosevelt took office, Seward Collins was calling for a “revival of monarchy” in America. Arguing that American capitalism had become a “plutocracy” which allowed the few wealthy individuals to control the whole of society, Collins wrote that the only possible way forward was to put in place a monarch “in whom all governmental responsibility of a State is vested.”¹ Why did Collins choose monarchy as his solution to the problems America faced in the Great Depression? After all, monarchy is an idea so foreign to the American political conscience going back to the nation's founding. The very suggestion of a monarchical solution to the problems America faced seems inherently provocative, and therefore easily dismissed.

Such was the case with Collins, publisher of the 1930s journal known as the *American Review*. Collins occupied a space far outside the political mainstream at the time, as evidenced by his favorable opinion toward monarchy. This does not mean that Collins should be dismissed from historical consideration. Numerous writers from various right-wing and antimodernist groups wrote for the *American Review* during the journal's four year existence, so the critiques Collins made came from an engagement with broader intellectual movements. These movements from which writers who published in the Collins journal belonged include the humanists,

¹ Seward Collins, “The Revival of Monarchy,” *American Review* 1.2 (1933): 245-246.

distributists, southern agrarians, and neo-scholastics.² Later, the *American Review* would become embroiled in controversy over an interview Collins gave to in which Collins labeled himself a “fascist.”³ The journal never seemed to have recovered from this controversy as evidenced by its demise the subsequent year.⁴

Collins’s extreme political positions are, however, only one aspect in a much richer and more complicated narrative. In this paper, I will present a two-sided view of Collins that both understands Collins as having legitimate political critiques while at the same time argues that Collins was a provocateur. Evidenced by his employment of terms like “monarchy” and “fascism” to describe his political opinions, Collins both sought out and welcomed attention for his extremism. After exploring Collins’s early life and his founding of the *American Review*, I will look at this Collins: the provocateur who advocated critiques and solutions to modern society as a way of injecting a particular anti-modernist criticism. Later in the paper, I will present the work in the *American Review* as representing legitimate intellectual currents in 1930s America. I will conclude that while Collins himself acted as a provocateur, a position that has caused historians to label him a “fascist,” this very label causes a dismissal of the specific ideas present in the *American Review*, a publication rich with anti-modernist intellectual critiques that were made in response to the Great Depression.

Early Life and Influences

Collins grew up the son of a cigar chain store operator in Syracuse, New York. Before college, Collins also lived in New York City, a wealthy neighborhood in Montclair, New Jersey,

² Seward Collins, “Editorial Notes,” *American Review* 1.1 (1933): 122-127.

³ Grace Lumpkin, “I Want a King,” *FIGHT! Against War and Fascism* 3.4 (1936): 3.

⁴ Albert Stone, Jr., “Seward Collins and the *American Review*: Experiment in Pro-Fascism, 1933-37,” *American Quarterly* 12.1 (1960): 19.

and at a boy's school in Munich, Germany for one year.⁵ His dad's cigar store chain company, United Cigar, turned out to be quite successful. United Cigars became the "retail arm" of American Tobacco, which had a nicotine monopoly. Using its ties to American Tobacco, the store leveraged its connections in a way that forced competitors out of business. Eventually, American Tobacco had to buy the United Cigars chain.⁶ These early experiences tell a few important details about Collins. First, he came from a wealthy background, but the wealth came from his dad's business success and not inheritance. Second, Collins was exposed to monopolies and the power of plutocrats in the American economy and society from a very young age, although it is unclear how much he knew about his father's business operation.

Collins attended the well-respected Hill School for high school and then went on to study at Princeton University.⁷ He took time off from Princeton to spend in Europe, although few other details are available. Collins may not have ever finished his Princeton education. Michael Tucker, who wrote the only full-length book on Collins, found a letter in which Collins admitted to moving from Princeton to Park Avenue in New York after "flunking out."⁸ Either way, after Collins left Princeton, he found himself as a member of New York's young elite in the 1920s. He ended up getting his first publishing job at *Vanity Fair* magazine.⁹ In 1922 or 1923, Collins received a devastating medical diagnosis: he had tuberculosis. Collins decided to take time off from New York and travel to the American West in hopes of recovering.¹⁰ Perhaps this trip opened Collins's eyes to a different world.

⁵ Michael Jay Tucker, *And Then They Loved Him: Seward Collins and the Chimera of an American Fascism* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2006) 17-18.

⁶ Tucker 15-17.

⁷ Edward Shapiro, "American Conservative Intellectuals, the 1930's, and the Crisis of Ideology," *Modern Age* 23.4 (1979): 370.

⁸ Tucker 49.

⁹ Stone 4.

¹⁰ Tucker 57.

After the trip, Collins began to be interested in New Humanist literary and intellectual ideas. Collins admitted that in 1926 he read the work of literary scholar Irving Babbitt which “swung [him] around to sympathy with tradition.”¹¹ Babbitt and Paul Elmer More were the two most prominent “New Humanists” in America. New Humanists’ “main concern...was to secure the universal and immutable ideal status of humanity.”¹² In order to achieve this, New Humanists believed that a new type of art was needed to combat “romantic self-expression.” The group wanted to use art as a means to “control emotion.”¹³ New Humanism can therefore be described as an anti-modernist critique of romanticism. Collins wanted to promote this philosophy, so he purchased a literary magazine known as *The Bookman* and changed its focus to writings of the New Humanists.¹⁴

This change came with great tension between Collins and *The Bookman*’s editor and former publisher, Burton Rascoe, as well as the magazine’s subscribers. Collins and Rascoe worked together to produce the magazine until those tensions caused Rascoe to resign. Collins was likely responsible, as Collins wanted to make *The Bookman* his own. As editor, Rascoe must have been in the way. Tucker finds this consistent with other instances in Collins’s life where he assumed a controlling manner.¹⁵ Collins hired Dorothea Brande to replace Rascoe, a woman with views closer to Collins. She and Collins worked together at both *The Bookman* and Collins’s subsequent publication, the *American Review* before the two married in 1936.¹⁶ With Rascoe gone from *The Bookman*, Collins and Brande added more New Humanist writings to the

¹¹ Gregory L. Schneider, *The Conservative Century: From Reaction to Revolution* (Lanham, M.D.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2009) 20.

¹² Yuzu Uchida, “Appropriating Virginia Woolf for the New Humanism: Seward Collins and *The Bookman*, 1927-1933,” *Virginia Woolf and the Literary Marketplace*, ed. Jeanne Dubino (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) 224.

¹³ Uchida 224.

¹⁴ Stone 4.

¹⁵ Tucker 86.

¹⁶ Tucker 87.

publication. Additional anti-modernist writers were added to the publication later in Collins's tenure as he came to adopt more anti-modernist views. Collins became interested in critiques of industrial society with the stock market crash in 1929 that led to severe economic problems, so Collins published English distributists including G.K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc's work in *The Bookman*. The problem for Collins was that this anti-modernist way of thinking angered many subscribers to *The Bookman*.¹⁷ Perhaps the number of subscribers did not matter much to Collins. After all, he turned the publication into a propaganda piece for his own anti-modernist views that were still developing at the time.

Seward Collins was a young self-made intellectual and Princeton drop out who used his parents' fortune to fund his intellectual pursuits. After he read *Babbitt*, Collins began to develop a place for himself in the traditionalist and anti-modern intellectual movements of the time. The stock market crash was an important moment for Collins, as he started to expand his traditionalist and anti-modernist views from literature to society, in particular industrial society. At the same time, he was "increasingly isolated" in New York literary circles due to his anti-modernist literary disposition.¹⁸ Perhaps it should not be surprising that Collins transformed *The Bookman* into a more political publication in 1933, as Collins started to his views and elite position in more political terms.

Founding of the *American Review*

Collins decided to end *The Bookman* in 1933 for a variety of reasons. First, *Reader's Digest* had taken over the market *The Bookman* occupied, a market which had become smaller since the beginnings of the Great Depression. *Reader's Digest* had a different strategy in the

¹⁷ Schneider 20.

¹⁸ Tucker 92.

market, as explained by Tucker: “where *The Bookman* had made its money by telling its readers what they ought to read, the *Reader’s Digest* went one step further, and read it for you, and then condensed it down into bite-sized chunks.”¹⁹ Second, Collins seemed to have lost interest in the literary publication. He had become interested in “politics, economics, philosophy, [and] psychic research,” not the lives of literary figures.²⁰ Third, Collins wanted to become a political force in America. Collins became more interested in right-wing intellectualism and politics during this period.²¹ Collins’s created the *American Review* for the explicit purpose of promoting critiques of modern society that he felt were not receiving the attention these ideas deserved. He said as much in an “Editorial Note” at the back of the journal’s first issue.²² In this way, the decision to replace the literary magazine with an intellectual and political journal likely reflected Collins’s own ideological project.

Collins sought to establish a foothold for the new publication. The *American Review* was conceived by Collins as presenting something fundamentally different from any other journal of the time. Collins aimed for the *Review* to bring together into one publication disparate critiques made against modern society from a “traditionalist basis.” While there were plenty of individuals making these critiques, Collins argued, they were “forced to work in isolation from each other and [had] achieved nothing like the influence to which their stature entitles them.”²³ In other words, the anti-modernists needed to be heard, and Collins was providing the journal where those ideas would be heard.

While anti-modernist ideas were the intellectual basis of the *American Review*, Collins had political ambitions that caused him to identify his journal with the “Radicals of the Right” is

¹⁹ Tucker 96.

²⁰ Stone 4.

²¹ Shapiro 370.

²² Collins, “Editorial Notes” 122.

²³ Collins, “Editorial Notes” 122.

Europe. Collins identified four groups who made up these “Radicals of the Right” in the first issue—the Humanists, the Distributists, the Southern Agrarians, and the Neo-Scholastics.²⁴

Tucker proposed that both monarchists and Fascists should have been included in the list.²⁵

There is certainly evidence for Tucker’s claim in the same “Editorial Note” in the first issue of the *American Review* that Collins used to label the four groups represented in the publication.

Collins wrote that there would be pieces that explored “Fascist economics...which have received scant treatment by our universally liberal and radical press [and] are badly in need of *sympathetic* exposition” (emphasis mine).²⁶ Beyond Fascist economics, Collins wanted the *American Review* to examine Hitler’s rise in Germany, which he also implied was not covered in the right manner by the American press. On the monarchy question, Collins promised the *American Review* would examine “the scrapping of the parliamentary system” in European countries with the president getting more power.²⁷

While Collins promised that fascism and monarchism would be examined in the *American Review*, even more instructive as to Collins’s own ideology is his use of the term “Radicals of the Right.” A search of the *New York Times* archives between 1930 and 1936 turned up multiple articles using the term. All of the articles which used the term were written by Europeans to describe fascist movements, particularly the Nazi Party’s rise in Germany. One article published in the *New York Times* was sent by cable from Germany the day prior to the national election between Hitler and President Paul von Hindenburg. In a radio address prior to the election, Hindenburg appealed “to the nation to not let the Radicals of the Right or Left drag

²⁴ Collins, “Editorial Notes” 123-125.

²⁵ Tucker 101.

²⁶ Collins, “Editorial Notes” 127.

²⁷ Collins, “Editorial Notes” 127.

Germany into civil war.”²⁸ Collins wanted to the *American Review* not only to be identified with the “Radicals of the Right,” but he wanted the journal to be the voice of the “Radicals of the Right” in America. The “Radicals of the Right” meant the Fascist parties in Europe, so Collins was clear about his fascist tendencies from the very beginning of the *American Review*. Collins not only wanted to explore the possibilities of fascist economics and monarchism; he wanted the journal to be identified as a fascist voice.

Was Seward Collins really a fascist? Did he create the *American Review* for the explicit purpose of having an organ to build a fascist movement, or at least an intellectual justification for such a movement, in America? Was Collins just using fascism to be provocative, or did he genuinely think fascism should be a political option in America? There are multiple answers to this debate that require a further examination of Collins and his *American Review*.

Provocateur par excellence

Understanding Collins’s position in founding the *American Review* helps to appreciate one of Collins’s main personality trait: he wanted to be provocative. What does this tell about what was written in the publication? Can we believe everything Collins wrote or said? In researching Collins I have discovered numerous instances in which Collins openly admitted to being provocative. Other times, he used particular language and published certain pieces in the *Review* that show his goal of provoking his audience. Looking at Collins as a provocateur, as I will in this section of the paper, does not mean to dismiss the ideas he presents as not representing views Collins holds. Rather, the language used and topics chosen show how difficult it is to come to an understanding of Collins without looking beyond his written work.

²⁸ Frederick Birchall, “Republic is in Balance: Opponents of Hindenburg Seek to Overthrow Democratic Rule,” *New York Times* 13 March 1932: N24.

Perhaps this is why many scholars have chosen to begin their interpretation of Collins with the incident of Collins labeling himself a fascist in an ill-fated 1936 interview with avowed socialist Grace Lumpkin. Published in a little known Communist publication called *FIGHT! Against War and Fascism*, the interview included Collins advocating many anti-modernist ideas in a non-intellectual manner and defending Hitler (albeit in 1936).²⁹ While this interview is important for understanding Collins as a provocateur, historians including Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. have used the interview to paint Collins as a fringe character who mattered very little outside his small orbit. In one of the earliest scholarly mentions of Collins and his publication, Schlesinger calls Collins “the spokesman for a reactionary (in the precise sense of the word) form of fascism, based not on anticipations of a new order but on a desire to restore the old.”³⁰ Ignored is the fact that Collins never called himself a fascist in published writings, although his use of the term “Radicals of the Right” to describe the *American Review* and his own flirtations with fascist ideology suggest that Collins wished to expose and publicize the viewpoints of fascist movements. Schlesinger goes on to present Collins as a weird individual whose descent into fascism ended with a severe decline in his “standards,” noting that “by the end of the decade [Collins] was putting up bail for pro-fascist agitators like Allen Zoll and for the wife of the Nazi agent Ignatz T. Griebel.”³¹ Caught up in looking for connections between Collins and fascism, Schlesinger misses the details of Collins’s self-stated motivations for posting bail which Collins claimed he did due to government overreach in the cases.³² In both instances, Schlesinger uses singular acts that can be interpreted to fit the narrative that Collins was a fascist. While it is important to look beyond Collins’s written work to understand what Collins believed, the 1936

²⁹ Lumpkin, 3, 14.

³⁰ Arthur Schlesinger, *The Age of Roosevelt, Volume III* (New York: Mariner Books, 1960) 71.

³¹ Schlesinger 72.

³² Tucker 161.

interview makes the problem of understanding Collins much greater. Every action Collins ever did before or after becomes framed in this one dimensional debate over Collins's supposed fascism.

The ultimate consequence of this can be seen in books like Michael Jay Tucker, *And Then They Loved Him: Seward Collins and the Chimera of an American Fascism*. Tucker's work contributes greatly to the historical literature on Collins, such as his efforts to discern a political program in the *American Review*.³³ Tucker asks if Collins really was a fascist, and this question is the lens through which Tucker views all of his research. He spends the entire book tracing Collins's life from Princeton to being mentioned in an FBI file as a possible Nazi sympathizer who needed to be watched by the government.³⁴ It is helpful to the historical researcher to have all the data Tucker gathers about Collins. Yet, Tucker had to examine all of Collins's life in order to show Collins was not a fascist. While Tucker's work contributes immensely to the historiography on Collins by discarding the assumption that is often made that Collins was a fascist, Tucker's book fails to get beyond this "yes" or "no" question, and thus he has further solidified the one dimensional historical debate about Collins as a fascist. In reality, Collins was a much more complicated individual, and any researcher could see his fascist tendencies on a quick glance through the few articles Collins wrote in the *American Review*. An answer to "so what?" is missing from Tucker's book. Also, if Collins can be viewed as a provocateur par excellence, a point Tucker might have missed, Tucker may have seen Collins's fascist sympathies in a different light.

Before getting into Collins's provocative use of the term "fascism" to describe his ideas, we need to ask two questions. First, did Collins admit on any occasions to being a provocative

³³ Tucker 131.

³⁴ Tucker 191-200.

individual? Second, does the work Collins produced in the *American Review* point to an effort to provoke for various reasons? Answering these questions will instruct us on how to view Collins's supposed fascism.

Collins admitted to taking extreme positions on multiple occasions as part of his own intellectual development. Historian Albert Stone, Jr. quotes a letter Collins sent to Walter Lippmann in which Collins wrote the following:

“ . . . I am willing to incur the charge of being fanatical and extreme—to publish and write *more extreme stuff than I actually wholeheartedly accept*—in order to help define and clarify issues. I don't mean so much that I intend any great duplicity or insincerity in my own words—though exaggeration for tactical purposes does not seem to me reprehensible—as that I am not going to hesitate to rush into an extreme position for fear that mature thought and changed conditions may cause me to eat my words. I dare say I shall embarrass myself after enough; and my friends as well” (emphasis mine)³⁵

The use of the term “wholeheartedly accept” suggests that Collins himself was still contemplating these positions. It is impossible for Collins to have fully accepted or advocated all the ideas he published as the *American Review* contained disparate and sometimes contradictory philosophical positions.³⁶ His intention, however, should not be viewed as insincere. Instead, the *American Review* was Collins's way of exploring how various extreme critiques operated and where these critiques would and would not fit together. The differences were then “thrashed out” on the publication's pages.³⁷ It is important to point out that Collins did not start out as a traditionalist or as the fascist as he is described as today. Collins came to his traditionalist

³⁵ Stone 3. The letter was written in May 1933, the same month Collins published his “Revival of Monarchy” editorial in the *Review*.

³⁶ Tucker 127.

³⁷ Collins, “Editorial Notes” 126.

position in 1926 after reading Irving Babbitt's scholarship. Prior to that, he might have even been a Marxist.³⁸ Collins therefore did not subscribe to a singular philosophy in the *American Review*. He "tried on" various critiques and solutions, including fascism, to see the reaction these views would produce. The *American Review* is representative of the particular critiques Collins pondered in the 1930s, which makes the journal sometimes confusing but nevertheless an important part of Collins's intellectual development.

Collins's letter to Walter Lippmann also shows that Collins embraced his position as a provocateur, not caring whether the views he published caused him or those who wrote for his publication pain or embarrassment. For Collins, extremism had a purpose. He saw extremism as necessary for helping "define and clarify issues." This letter reveals that Collins himself maintained that he was a provocateur, which makes anything Collins said, wrote, or published subject to scrutiny for being a provocative act meant to elicit a response rather than a well thought-out position intended to convince. Collins's goal was always to provoke rather than be a mediator. He wanted the *American Review* to provide space for moral solutions to societal problems to be heard, which he viewed as absent from the mainstream publications of the time.³⁹ Collins thought these extreme viewpoints should be published, as Collins believed positions outside the political and intellectual mainstream still deserved to get their proper hearing. Collins wanted to define himself as an intellectual who could stir the waters, not the reactionary puppet for fascism he gets labeled by Schlesinger.

Even more important than this one instance of Collins admitting to Lippmann that he delighted in taking extremist positions is Collins' public admission that he used the same technique in the 1936 interview that likely brought down the *American Review*. At the end of the

³⁸ Gregory L. Schneider, *The Conservative Century: From Reaction to Revolution* (Lanham, M.D.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2009) 20.

³⁹ Collins, "Editorial Notes" 127.

interview published in *FIGHT! Against War and Fascism*, Lumpkin attempted to link the Southern Agrarian writers to Collins through the similarity in their ideas and their association with the *American Review*.⁴⁰ Allen Tate, a prominent Southern Agrarian, wrote a letter responding to these accusations that appeared in *The New Republic*. In the letter, Tate took issue with Lumpkin's assertion that he and other Southern Agrarians impart fascist ideas in their writing. Tate claimed he was not a fascist, and would favor Communism (a system he despised) over Fascism.⁴¹ Tate also departed from many of Collins's more radical claims in the interview, such as Collins's supposed desire to "restore the Middle Ages."⁴² Lumpkin responded with her own letter in the *New Republic*, asserting her original claims about the similarity in the views the Southern Agrarians have with fascist ideology. She wrote to Tate that while many of the statements the Southern Agrarians are not explicitly fascist in nature, "they are the theoretical foundation of a reactionary movement."⁴³ In a later issue of *The New Republic* published a couple weeks later, Collins himself responded to the Lumpkin and Tate back and forth correspondence. Collins made clear in his letter that the views expressed in the interview were his own. Then, Collins admitted to assuming his role of provocateur that may have caused the confusion to begin with. Collins claimed the interview questions about his beliefs were "supplemented by questions from a young man who accompanied her, whose horror at my views was so amusingly manifest that I indulged in some extravagances for his special benefit." According to Collins, he was trying to be lighthearted "in the face of preposterous questions."

⁴⁰ Lumpkin 14.

⁴¹ "Fascism and Southern Agrarians," *The New Republic* 87 (1936): 75-76.

⁴² "Fascism and Southern Agrarians" 76.

⁴³ "Fascism and Southern Agrarians" 76.

Finally, Collins asserted that this is all a “gross distortion” that one “expects in a Communist interview.”⁴⁴

Here, we get the Collins who warned Walter Lippmann that in Collins’s taking “extreme positions” Collins may sometimes “embarrass” both himself and his friends.⁴⁵ Choosing to mock questions asked by Lumpkin and her interview partner, Collins implicated himself in being a radical fascist who wanted to return to medieval times. And, the Southern Agrarians were embarrassed by Lumpkin for their association with Collins and his views. Collins did not apologize for what he said during the interview, but instead pointed to the absurdity of the questions and while critiquing Communist publications for also expressing ridiculous views. Collins’s provocative answers read outside this context make him appear far outside the mainstream and, in many ways, unserious. By Collins’s own admission, however, Collins tried to provoke based on the absurd questions given to him.

Let me return to looking at Collins’s editorial “The Revival of Monarchy,” which appeared in the second issue of the *American Review*, published in May 1933. In the editorial, Collins offered a particular critique of American capitalism and suggested the only way to fix the problems is for one individual to come to power “in whom all governmental responsibility of a State is vested.”⁴⁶ This individual was Collins’s monarch. Collins called American capitalism a “plutocracy” which allowed the few wealthy individuals to control the whole of society.⁴⁷ How can a plutocracy be fixed? Collins argued that neither the “aristocratic solution” nor “democratic solution” to cure the plutocracy were possible. Already on the decline, the aristocracy could not remold the economy in a manner that would change the course for the better of the people. This

⁴⁴ “Sunny Side of Fascism,” *The New Republic* 89 (1936): 132.

⁴⁵ Stone 3.

⁴⁶ Collins, “Revival” 246.

⁴⁷ Collins, “Revival” 245.

would be against the aristocracy's self-interest.⁴⁸ The democratic solution for Collins would lead to Communism, a point he made elsewhere.⁴⁹ Looking for a third way forward, Collins suggested that the only solution is to establish a "monarchy" in America.⁵⁰ Rather than the people making decision as happens in a pure democracy, or one wealthy class making the decisions as happens in an aristocracy, Collins believed the best option was for one individual who knows what is best for society to make the decisions. Similar to Rousseau's benevolent monarch, Collins viewed his monarch as governing "in the interest of the whole state...the ultimate sovereignty of the people is symbolized by him and realized by him in action."⁵¹ Collins quoted Hillaire Belloc, who said that a monarch is supposed "to protect the weak against the strong" and prevent the corrupt inequalities that exist in society.⁵² Unlike laissez-faire conservatives of the era, Collins viewed capitalism as a plutocracy in America. He suggested instead a particular type of monarchy to cure capitalism's ills.

At the time Collins wrote this piece, Franklin Delano Roosevelt had only months before assumed the presidency in the midst of the Great Depression. The New Deal reforms were beginning to be implemented. Collins mentioned that Roosevelt already faced accusations of being a dictator in some press corners.⁵³ During the Great Depression, conservatives in America had to decide whether or not to continue embracing the laissez-faire economic policies many argued caused the 1929 stock market crash. As Gregory Schneider pointed out, social conservatives and economic conservatives did not present a united front during the Great Depression years. Rather, many broke away from supporting the capitalist system they viewed as

⁴⁸ Collins, "Revival" 245.

⁴⁹ Collins, "Revival" 248-249.

⁵⁰ Collins, "Revival" 246.

⁵¹ Collins, "Revival" 246.

⁵² Collins, "Revival" 246.

⁵³ Collins, "Revival" 243.

undermining many core conservative beliefs beyond economics.⁵⁴ Some went as far as advocating fascism, a position history has defined Collins as taking.⁵⁵

One interpretation of Collins's editorial is that his advocating monarchy fit into one part of the conservative critiques at the time. The argument goes that while Collins's monarchical solution defined himself and his publication with a new revolutionary conservatism, this was a legitimate intellectual conservative position in the period. During a time when new solutions beyond the current constitutional order were being advocated on the Left, Collins sought to give voice to intellectuals advocating a revolutionary position on the Right.⁵⁶ In Europe, fascism was sold as a revolutionary third way that attracted conservatives splintered across the political spectrum on the Right. Did Collins just want a similar revolutionary third way in America? Is this why he adopted the idea of having a strong man lead the nation from the early days of the *American Review*? This position would have been unsettling for laissez-faire conservatives, but perhaps Collins wanted to set himself and the *American Review* outside the conservative norm in American politics. Maybe Collins wanted to be a voice for a new kind of conservatism that recognized the problems with capitalism and could provide a clear alternative possibility to communism. Maybe, as Schneider claims, Collins' position stood inside the conservative debate at the time, yet is discounted today because monarchism and fascism were "roads not taken" for American conservatism as a whole. Edward Shapiro directly places Collins into the conservative crisis in the 1930s, arguing that individuals like Collins chose to back President Roosevelt and argue for a more authoritarian conservatism.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Schneider 18-24.

⁵⁵ Schlesinger 71.

⁵⁶ Schneider 20.

⁵⁷ Shapiro 375.

While this is a common interpretation of Collins today, I find looking at Collins in this manner ignores the ways in which his ideological writings were a reflection of his deliberate embracing of the role of a provocateur. Collins has become identified in historical literature as everything from a monarchist to an anti-Semite to a fascist. Tucker argues that it is difficult to find one political program in the magazine, as one can find evidence the magazine “supported every political position from Fascism to Marxism to an apolitical quietism.”⁵⁸ The confusion about what ideology Collins embraced in the publication is a direct result of Collins the provocateur, who advanced multiple radical, and sometimes conflicting, opinions as part of his own quest to find his ideology. Right after Roosevelt took office in 1933, Collins called for monarchy to replace the government in America. The American Revolution occurred in opposition to monarchy, making this idea outside American political discourse. Collins’s idea of a monarch “in whom all governmental responsibility of a State is vested” differed from the old European monarchies sounds closer to dictatorship than monarchy.⁵⁹ Why did Collins use the term then? The answer is simple: to be provocative and establish himself as leader of a reactionary movement in the United States.

The *American Review* contains numerous instances where the terms used in the publication were likely there to provoke readers. The first issue included an article promoting the Italian fascist state’s corporatism for America.⁶⁰ Later in 1933, Collins ran a book review of a book called *The Menace of Fascism* that equated fascism with morality and socialism with the devil.⁶¹ In 1934, Collins claimed fascism had been woefully misunderstood, and the European

⁵⁸ Tucker 127.

⁵⁹ Collins, “Revival” 245-246.

⁶⁰ Harold Goad, “The Principles of the Corporate State,” *American Review* 1.1 (1933): 80-93.

⁶¹ Marvin McCord, “Mr. Starchey’s ‘Fascism,’” *American Review* 1.4 (1933): 489.

fascist regimes were only trying to return to the old agricultural order.⁶² In 1936, Collins himself wrote a book review alleging that Americans were not a “sovereign people in our most vital dimensions,” instead controlled by British propaganda.⁶³ These stances were likely confusing at the time, a point Stone makes in his article on Collins. In the letters between Grace Lumpkin, Allen Tate, and Seward Collins in *The New Republic* in 1936, each individual used a different definition of fascism to either defend or critique one another’s beliefs.⁶⁴ The *American Review* itself used vague and loose language to be provocative. Recall that Collins tried to make the *American Review* occupy a space outside the mainstream publications of the time. And, remember that Collins promised to provide a place where ideas like “fascism” were not easily dismissed.⁶⁵ The deliberate use of vague and loose language in the *American Review* came from this very notion—the ideas in the publication should not have been controversial (in Collins’s view), but the ideas were controversial to the average reader. Collins intentionally published these controversial ideas and terms throughout the *American Review* to draw attention to those ideas and terms, further showing the Collins was a reactionary provocateur.

Another problem is that Collins allowed himself to represent the fascist, or often “fascist,” position at lectures and debates during his time as publisher of the *American Review*. At a forum on “Political Philosophies” at Wesleyan University in 1934, Seward Collins was labeled in the *New York Times* as the “Fascist” at the forum. No other political ideology, including Socialism and Communism, was in quotation marks in the article.⁶⁶ Collins also gave a talk titled “Fascism” at Muhlenberg Branch Library in New York City in April 1934.⁶⁷ Also in

⁶² Seward Collins, “Liberal, Socialist, Communist,” *American Review* 2.5 (1934): 612.

⁶³ Seward Collins, “British Propaganda,” *American Review* 8.4 (1936): 512.

⁶⁴ Stone 19.

⁶⁵ Collins, “Editorial Notes” 127.

⁶⁶ “Students to Hear Political Views,” *New York Times* 2 Dec. 1934: N3.

⁶⁷ “What Is Going On This Week,” *New York Times* 29 Apr. 1934: N7.

1934, Collins and avowed socialist Victor Calverton hosted a debate in Baltimore titled “Resolved: Fascism is the Solution To Our Social Ills.” Collins argued the pro-fascist position in the debate. Both Collins and Calverton had a great time doing the debate, and letters between them suggest they believed the debate was fun.⁶⁸ Tucker, who does not believe Collins is a fascist, has argued that evidence like this points to Collins as a “fan” of fascism.⁶⁹ Such a view could be used to argue that Collins was unserious about his political leanings and was just interested in exploring fascist possibilities. But, why had Collins used the term fascism then? Why did Collins enjoy being called a fascist? Why did Collins not go further and just label himself a fascist and put himself in the lot with Germany and Italy? I suggest the answer is that Collins used the term “fascism” to be provocative, similar to the other instances already described. His critiques all came from political and intellectual movements that advocated traditionalism, but Collins never had a singular ideology inside that framework. Rather, he explored the various ideas floating around in right wing movements in the 1930s and sought responses to those positions. Collins thrived on stirring the pot, and embraced the ideology of a reactionary provocateur.

Collins and 1930s reactionary movements

My labeling Collins a provocateur comes with some risk. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., whose dismissal of Collins as unimportant to history I have already critiqued, and others might confuse my calling Collins a “provocateur” to mean that Collins never used the *American Review* to articulate legitimate political or intellectual positions. This could make it easier to dismiss Collins as a reactionary fascist when, in reality, fascism was only one of the many systems and

⁶⁸ Tucker 145.

⁶⁹ Tucker 133.

philosophies Collins contemplated. This is the problem I will address in this section of the paper. I will use the historical literature on the *American Review* itself and on the movements represented on the journal's pages to show that Collins promoted a variety of different viewpoints from the 1930s traditionalist and anti-modernist movements. Collins and the *American Review* itself, however, lacked a specific political program. The *American Review* should not be seen as an outlet that's primary purpose was to provide the intellectual backing for a fascist state in America, as historical scholarship on Collins and his publication has implied.

Michael Jay Tucker's work rightly moves beyond the one-dimensional nature of other research on Collins that focuses on his fascist tendencies. Tucker labors over the *American Review* in search of the publication's political program to show that Collins was not a full-blown, card-carrying fascist. I have already mentioned Tucker's difficulty in finding this program, although he ultimately does find a set of ideas that were consistently present in the *American Review*, including corporatism and private property. Tucker only achieves this "program" after examining every issue of the *Review* over its four year existence.⁷⁰ While Tucker labels this set of ideas the "political program" of the publication, I would argue that a few repeating ideas falls short of a specific "program." Departing from Tucker's claim that a political program can be discovered in the *American Review*, I suggest instead that the writings in the *American Review* represented traditionalist and anti-modernist intellectual currents in 1930s America.

Collins and other *American Review* writers occupied a particular niche of 1930s American conservatism seeking a third way forward. Seward Collins was an advocate for that intellectual position, whether called monarchism, fascism, or any other *-ism*. Fraught with worry that Communism may be the inevitable alternative to capitalism, Gregory Schneider argues that there were many "roads not taken" for the conservative movement in the 1930's.

⁷⁰ Tucker 131.

Fascism was not embraced by the conservative movement of the time, but some conservatives like Collins, flirted with fascism. Collins was just one of many “conservative intellectuals [who] attempted to create different alternatives to address the economic problems facing the nation.”⁷¹ Schneider describes 1930’s conservatism as a time when cultural conservatives in particular looked to abandon the laissez-faire economic position that was a central part of the movement in the early twentieth century (and even today).⁷² Some of the *American Review*’s writers advocated this traditionalist conservative position, including Pulitzer Prize-winner Herbert Agar and the many Southern Agrarians he was associated with.⁷³ Edward Shapiro also directly places Collins into the conservative crisis in the 1930s. Shapiro argues that without a major leader, the conservative movement broke apart. Some individuals, including Collins, backed President Roosevelt and argued for a more authoritarian form of conservatism.⁷⁴ This critique was of interest to many intellectuals at the time, whether they agreed or disagreed with the position. Perhaps this is why Walter Lippmann, the prominent American columnist and cultural critic of the period, read the *American Review*.⁷⁵ Collins was not the only conservative in 1930s America to explore a return to traditionalist ideas or even fascism.

Nor was Collins alone when he questioned if the entire American republican system needed to be overthrown. Senator Huey Long (D-LA) and the radio priest Father Coughlin were popular voices who like Collins questioned modern industrialization and American capitalism. Father Coughlin attracted tens of millions of radio listeners who listened to his anti-Semitic and

⁷¹ Schneider 18.

⁷² Schneider 24-25.

⁷³ Robert Brinkmeyer, *The Fourth Ghost: White Southern Writers and European Fascism, 1930-1950* (Baton Rouge, L.A.: Louisiana State University Press, 2009) 35.

⁷⁴ Shapiro 375.

⁷⁵ Tucker 143-144.

proto-fascist rants.⁷⁶ The 1930s was a time where American society's basic tenets were questioned each and every day by millions of its citizens, some who stood in the bread lines waiting for their next meal during the Great Depression. Individuals like Coughlin gave many Americans a radical critique that helped explain their dire position. Both Long and Coughlin "faded so quickly from prominence" after this brief period, but their popularity at the time reveals a society where some were ready to accept the radical change Collins thought was necessary.⁷⁷

Collins's anti-modernist ideas were present in right-wing intellectual movements prior to the 1930s. There is a sense of impending doom in much of 1930s intellectual writing, a position that was present in the *American Review*. Capitalism was floundering and the values that made America survive up until that point were coming under question. This questioning began well before the Great Depression, as T.J. Jackson Lears pointed out in *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920*. Lears wrote that many people became disenchanted with modern culture in the 1880's and started to question the modern industrial society's virtues. For antimodernists, morality was lacking in the culture. Antimodernist intellectuals sought a return to earlier times, even as far back as an idealized Middle Ages. The *American Review* published many book reviews for works on the Middle Ages, fitting with the obsession antimodernist intellectuals started to have with the Middle Ages around the turn of the twentieth century.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Peter Amann. "A 'Dog in the Nighttime' Problem: American Fascism in the 1930s," *The History Teacher* 19.4 (1986): 573.

⁷⁷ Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982) 261.

⁷⁸ T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880-1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981) 142.

Now that I have looked at anti-modernism in general, I will explore a few of the intellectual groups that Collins recruited to write for the *American Review*. I will show that each of these groups had a particular critique of modern society that was a legitimate intellectual position at the time. I will use the five groups Collins mentioned in his “Editorial Note” in the publication’s first issue: the American humanists, English distributists, Southern Agrarians, Neo-Scholastics, and fascists.⁷⁹

The American humanists, also known as the New Humanists, were led by Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More, both of whom wrote for the *American Review*. The New Humanists wanted to limit “romantic self-expression” in art (specifically literature) and to use art as a means to “control emotion.”⁸⁰ Irving Babbitt was a Harvard professor concerned with American decline due to the modern industrial era.⁸¹ The New Humanists suggested looking to the past to determine how to proceed in the future, a position Collins held as well. Collins first became interested in traditionalist ideas after reading the New Humanists’ work, which was originally literary criticism.⁸² Collins’s appreciation of New Humanism contributed to his intellectual interests changing to the manner that was presented in the *American Review*.

The next group that published in the *American Review* was the English distributists, who included G.K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc. Chesterton and Belloc were famous in England at the time, and Collins wanted to bring their ideas to the United States.⁸³ The distributists believed in giving as many people property as was feasibly possible. Distributists critiqued capitalism as a plutocracy and called for land redistribution so people could be owners.⁸⁴ Collins was interested

⁷⁹ Collins, “Editorial Note” 122-127.

⁸⁰ Uchida 224.

⁸¹ Tucker 102.

⁸² Schneider 20.

⁸³ Collins, “Editorial Note,” 124.

⁸⁴ Tucker 103.

in their economic views in particular, which recognized the dramatic change that would have to be instituted to escape from the inhumane capitalist plutocracy they believed controlled the country.⁸⁵

The Neo-Scholastics were another group Collins recruited to publish in the *American Review* who focused on the Catholic religion. Tucker wrote that Collins expanded the meaning of Neo-Scholastics beyond the traditional definition which is as follows: a group that “attempted to apply the social ideology of the great Catholic scholastics to contemporary problems.”⁸⁶ Philip Gleason argued in *Keeping the Faith: American Catholicism Past and Present* that Neo-Scholastics viewed Protestantism as a corrupting influence in modern society, while the Middle Ages were a time of Catholic “unity.”⁸⁷ Collins and the *American Review* writers were nostalgic for this unity to return, a common cry during a time of societal upheaval. This is one reason why the American review published a great deal of pieces related to the Middle Ages, as the Middle Ages came to represent a time where Christianity ruled. One example in the publication is a book review of *The Medieval Philosophy* by Etienne Gilson. In the review, Chas Ronayne noted that the book defended medieval philosophy from the onslaught of critics who say “that the Middle Ages lacked a system of rational thought that could be called their own.”⁸⁸ Instead, Gilson saw the Middle Ages as having had a “Christian philosophy” that contributed to law, order, and intellectual development.⁸⁹ Collins believed that the modern mechanistic American society was losing its Christian values and becoming disordered as a result. Collins wanted a return to a time where this order existed, which he advocated could be done by installing a New Monarchy.⁹⁰ At

⁸⁵ Tucker 103-104.

⁸⁶ Tucker 111.

⁸⁷ Philip Gleason, *Keeping the Faith: American Catholicism Past and Present* (Notre Dame, I.N.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1987) 28-29.

⁸⁸ Charles Ronayne, “The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy,” *American Review* 8.1 (1936): 125.

⁸⁹ Ronayne 128.

⁹⁰ Collins, “The Revival of Monarchy” 256.

the same time, Collins clearly wanted medieval philosophy to be viewed as a legitimate object of study, rather than dismissed as irrelevant to the Ancients and the Moderns. This critique of modern society as disordered and un-Christian was a view Collins shared with other anti-modernists, in particular the Neo-Scholastics.

The Southern Agrarians, a prominent group of writers that included Allen Tate who published in the *American Review*, related the critique of modern society to a narrative in which the North tried to impose industrialism on the South through the Civil War. Paul Murphy described Tate as “an intellectual Robert E. Lee [who] planned to take a cultural war to the opponents’ territory and outflank them.”⁹¹ David Blight’s *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* took that critique one step further and traced the “Lost Cause” myth throughout post-Civil War southern intellectual discourse. In this “Lost Cause” phenomenon, southerners tried to deny “slavery’s centrality to the [Civil War].”⁹² Northern industrialism, motivated by profit, sought to impose itself on the South thereby disrupting the South’s “organic civilization.”⁹³ Collins brought the Southern Agrarians into the *American Review* because he saw many of the group’s critiques of modern society as an important element of American anti-modernism.

The last group Collins says would be included in the *American Review* was the fascists. As I have already said, Collins believed that fascist ideas needed to be examined and not dismissed as they were by more mainstream publications. For example, Collins believed that “Fascist economics...which have received scant treatment by our universally liberal and radical

⁹¹ Paul Murphy, *The Rebuke of History: The Southern Agrarians and American Conservative Thought* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2001) 48.

⁹² David Blight, *Race and Reunion: Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 2001) 287.

⁹³ Blight 257.

press [and] are badly in need of sympathetic exposition.”⁹⁴ I have attributed Collins’s choice to include and explore fascist ideologies as having to do with Collins’s political ambitions and provoking. While this may be true, we still should recognize that the fascists were only one of the many groups Collins sought to look at in his publication. The *American Review* was not about creating a fascist program for the United States.

This brings me back to the Southern Agrarians, who worried that the group’s association with Collins would be a problem after he labeled himself a fascist in the ill-fated 1936 interview. A historical debate exists over whether the Agrarians actually agreed with Collins’s views from the beginning. Paul Conkin noted that the Southern Agrarians were skeptical of Collins from the and only signed on to the *American Review* to get a northern publisher.⁹⁵ Robert Brinkmeyer, on the other hand, has argued that the Southern Agrarians were sympathetic to Collins’s beliefs all along, including Collins’s flirtation with fascism. For Brinkmeyer, any effort to dismiss the Southern Agrarians as skeptical of Collins attempts to dismiss the Southern Agrarians’ flirtations with fascist ideas.⁹⁶ While Collins was clear from the first issue of the *American Review* that the publication would be *sympathetic* to fascism, this is far different from the Southern Agrarians accepting fascist ideas in particular those from the fascist movements in Europe.⁹⁷ The Southern Agrarians were a group caught up in its own problems in the South, and being accused of harboring fascist tendencies later in the 1930s was not helpful. The group’s focus was more on justifying southern tradition, including racism and segregation. Somehow their supposed associations with Collins’s “fascism” were worrying enough that Grace Lumpkin accused them

⁹⁴ Collins, “Editorial Notes” 127.

⁹⁵ Paul Conkin, *The Southern Agrarians* (Knoxville, T.N.: University of Tennessee Press, 1988) 106-107.

⁹⁶ Brinkmeyer 39-40.

⁹⁷ Collins, “Editorial Notes” 127.

of being fascists. The applications of their anti-modernist beliefs should have been far more worrisome.

The Southern Agrarians' case shows what happens when a loaded-term like fascism that had a changing meaning in the 1930s based on events in Europe is used to apply to a group of people. Dismissing Collins as a strange fascist in America misses the point that Collins was well connected with prominent intellectuals during the 1930s. When Collins is dismissed as a fascist, his actual publication and the plethora of ideas presented by Collins and numerous other authors are dismissed as far away from mainstream thought at the time. This could not be further from the truth.

Seward Collins's *American Review* can, however, help the researcher see what proto-fascism would have looked like in 1930s America. Collins was not a pledged, card-carrying Nazi, but he did sympathize with fascism—just like he sympathized with anti-modernism, distributism, Neo-Scholasticism and New Humanism. Merged together however, these different ideologies could have formed the intellectual basis for proto-fascism to develop in the United States had each group had more support. Proto-fascism in America could have been traditionalist, pro-segregation, and supportive of a radical proposal for land redistribution. The *American Review* could have been the center of proto-fascist intellectualism, and maybe even of a political movement that supported other fascist regimes or tried to launch a new political party in America. The *American Review* would not last for more than a year after Collins labeled himself a fascist.⁹⁸ If it is true that Collins had larger political dreams, those goals were shadowed by this time. “Fascist” had become a word you did not want to be called.

Yet, the *American Review* was clearly about much more than fascism. The problem is that too many historians have allowed Collins's fascism to dominate their works. Michael Jay

⁹⁸ Stone 19.

Tucker's book on Collins includes many useful portions to understand who Collins was, but the book is dragged down by Tucker's insistence on trying to prove that Collins was not a fascist. He concluded the latter, although it seems Tucker defines fascism as Nazism.⁹⁹

The *American Review* should be viewed as a way to understand the ideas being published by an individual who identified himself as a fascist, albeit not at the publication's outset. Collins presented his own view of what fascism actually is throughout the *American Review*, and two historians have tried to determine what Collins's fascism was about. Schneider has understood Collins's definition of fascism "as a transitional form of government from a plutocracy...to an authoritarian rule, which he believed necessary to check the power of the masses, who, if unchecked would bring about a communist system."¹⁰⁰ Albert Stone pointed to a letter Collins sent the *New Republic* where Collins says fascism is "a 'petit bourgeois' movement tending toward an agrarian and distributist society."¹⁰¹ As Stone points out, Collins understood fascism to mean something very different from his critics.¹⁰²

Reconciling Collins the Provocateur and the Reactionary Movements

This paper has offered two ways to look at Seward Collins and his journal, the *American Review*. After exploring Collins's early life and showing how he came to launch the *American Review*, I examined Collins as a reactionary provocateur who used vague language and controversial terms to provoke his audience into looking at the ideas that the mainstream publications refused to consider. Then I scrutinized the historical literature on Collins and the groups who wrote for the journal to show that while Collins has been dismissed by historians like Schlesinger as unimportant in the grand scheme of the 1930s, Collins's ideas did not lack

⁹⁹ Tucker 195-197.

¹⁰⁰ Schneider 21.

¹⁰¹ Stone 18.

¹⁰² Stone 18.

backing by certain intellectual movements and some prominent writers and thinkers. These two seemingly disparate claims must be reconciled.

Seward Collins was a complex individual who did not subscribe to one political ideology. The *American Review* should be seen as a product of Collins's transition to an anti-modernist view of the world. His flirtations with fascism were exactly that—flirtations. Flirtations like others in right-wing ideological circles at the time may have had. Collins placed a label on himself in the 1936 interview with Grace Lumpkin, and that label has stuck in the small amount of historical literature that exists on Collins. This is unfair to Collins, as his life is very different from the typical individual we might label a “fascist.” Collins was not involved in paramilitaries or even in any major protest movement. Collins was an intellectual who had ideas that were somewhere in between capitalism and communism. And, Collins had not even held these ideas for very long before he became defined by them. Prior to founding the *American Review* Collins had converted to traditionalism, but before that he was likely on the left side of the political spectrum. Fascism was one of the ideas Collins explored as he made his intellectual transition the Far Right, but his fascism is how he is remembered.

Collins's *American Review* was the primary place where Collins tried on various right wing ideologies and sought a reaction to his ideas. As I have shown, the ideas presented in the *American Review* were part of established intellectual movements of the age. While Collins was a provocateur, he was also a serious individual who debated these ideas and tried to put them together into a coherent journal. Collins the provocateur did not just publish certain pieces in order to make people upset; he wanted readers to take their preconceptions about these ideas and think about them in a serious manner, even if the reader, or even Collins, did not fully accept the

idea. This is how Collins's status as a provocateur fits in with the fact that the *American Review* represented numerous intellectual groups on the right.

Conclusion

Collins has been punished by history for having used the term fascism to describe his beliefs in one interview. I have shown in this paper that while Collins explored fascism as a possibility, he was not a full-on fascist by any means. Placing a label on ideas or individuals can easily deny proper historical treatment to both people and their ideas. Fascism presents the clearest example of this phenomenon. It also reveals a historical and epistemological problem: the dangers of hindsight clouding the historian's ability to understand a past era in its own terms and context. Seward Collins used the word "fascism" to describe his beliefs in 1936 not knowing how this term would be construed as a result of the Second World War, the Nazi "Final Solution," and the Holocaust. Schlesinger is not a bad historian for dismissing Collins as a reactionary fascist. The problem is in the way history is conducted: historians always are able to see the trajectories of what happened, even unintentionally. When Collins is labeled a fascist, you know the trajectory of fascism whereas Collins had no idea what that trajectory would be in the 1930s. This is an important lesson for all historians to remember.

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