

Editorial: Populism and Fascism

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Editorial

Populism and fascism have much in common. Both of them arise in times of crisis, oppose established elites, promise an alternative to a lack of political representation of the people, and draw on the figure of a charismatic leader. Typical both for populism and fascism are a reevaluation of the concept of the people and the mobilization of the masses. Another characteristic of both populism and fascism is a direct and identificatory relationship to an individual who claims to represent the people. Just as fascist movements and regimes are capable of integrating populist elements, populism may harbor features of fascism, as in the case of right-wing populism. However, although both political phenomena have many elements in common and are strongly interconnected, they are not at all identical. This issue of *Totalitarismus und Demokratie* therefore explores common grounds, differences and interconnections between populism and fascism both historically and in the present day.

Populism is a classical subject of political theory and political sociology. Although the term necessarily harbors many different variants of the phenomenon as well as a variety of ideological influences, populism is characterized by a number of identifiable features. These include adherence to popular sovereignty and the demand for popular representation, the idea of the people as a homogeneous, innocent and upright entity, a particularly close relationship between people and its leader, an anti-institutionalist attitude and resentment towards elites and established parties.¹ However, these features do not tell us enough to determine what the ideological inclination of populist movements, actors and parties are. Following Cas Mudde, we may call populism a “thin ideology”² which provides a kind of ideological framework for different, more consistent ideologies. This explains the various kinds of populism, ranging from left-wing, liberal and neoliberal to right-wing or right-wing-extremist ideologies. From this perspective, populism may well appear in combination with fascism.

Historians have identified populism as an important factor in the consolidation of fascist regimes. Historically, populism tends to arise at moments in which a political system is in crisis and when the legitimacy of political governments and institutions is weakened. In this context, populism appears to be primarily a phenomenon in which political actors question the role of political elites and institutions and apply certain discursive strategies which place the direct relationship between the people and their leader at the centre of political rhetoric. These mechanisms were fundamental for both Italian Fascism and German National Socialism.

1 See No. 2/2011 of *Totalitarismus und Demokratie*: “Populismus: Konzepte und Theorien”.

2 Cas Mudde, *The Populist Zeitgeist*. In: *Government & Opposition*, 39 (2004), pp. 541–563.

There are now so many studies of fascism that it seems to be hardly possible to take into consideration all of the theories, applications and interpretations of this term.³ In 1980 Stanley G. Payne summarized the main theories in terms of nine groups.⁴ As in the case of populism in the social sciences, there is still no general theory or interpretation of fascism on which all historians could agree.⁵ However, it is possible to distinguish two poles which define the outer limits of the range of interpretations of fascism. According to the first model, Fascism and National Socialism are national phenomena which cannot or only partially be classified according to a general category of fascism. At the other end of the spectrum is the idea that fascism is basically a political phenomenon which is not confined merely to Italy and Germany. This definition of fascism is “generic” and refers to an idealtypical definition which emphasizes the common features of this phenomenon. Payne defines the term “generic fascism” with reference to the following characteristics: “the fascist negations”, that is, anti-liberalism, anti-communism, anti-conservatism, then “common points of ideology and goals” such as the construction of a nationalist, authoritarian state, and “special features of style and organisation” such as political staging and mass mobilization by the state.⁶

Gino Germani was one of the first authors to deal with the similarities and differences between fascism and populism. By populism, he meant a “multiclass movement expressed in some sort of left/right heterogeneous ideology” which was based on three preconditions: first, the difference between middle class and upper class, second “a relative recent formation of middle class, particularly the urban middle class” and, third, the spread of “egalitarian patterns” in society.⁷ This formed the basis for his distinction between Latin American “national populism” and European fascism. The former, he stated, leads towards an authoritarian, the latter towards a totalitarian regime. According to Germani, fascism in

3 Constantin Iordachi. *Comparative Fascist Studies. An Introduction*. In: Iordachi (Ed.) *Comparative Fascist Studies: New Perspectives*, London 2010, pp. 1–55, here 2.

4 “1. A violent, dictatorial agent of bourgeois capitalism, 2. the product of a cultural or moral breakdown. 3. The result of neurotic or pathological psychosocial impulses, 4. a product of the rise of amorphous masses. 5. The consequence of a certain stage of economic growth, or historical sequence of national development. 6. A typical manifestation of twentieth-century totalitarianism 7. A struggle against ‘modernisation’ 8. The expression of a unique radicalism of the middle classes. 9. The denial that such a thing as ‘generic fascism’ ever existed [...] and denial of the possibility of a general concept of ‘fascism’.” Stanley G. Payne, *The Concepts of Fascism*. In: Stein Ugelvik Larsen/Bernt Hagtvet/Jan Peter Myklebust (Ed.), *Who were the Fascists. Social Roots of European Fascism*, Bergen 1980, pp. 14–25, here 14.

5 *Avant-Propos*. In: Serge Bernstein/Pierre Milza, *Dictionnaire historique des fascismes et du nazisme*, Paris 2010, pp. 5–17, here 5.

6 Payne, *The Concepts of Fascism*, pp. 21 f. See also Robert Paxton. *Anatomy of Fascism*, New York 2004.

7 Gino Germani, *Authoritarianism, Fascism, and National Populism*, New Brunswick 1978, pp. 95 f.

its development phase showed similarities to the populist movements of Latin America, although the social context and the role of the social classes were different.

By drawing on theories of fascism and populism, this issue of *Totalitarismus und Demokratie* explores the differences, similarities and interconnections between fascism and populism in two ways: by referring to historic fascism and National Socialism on the one hand, and to current cases of right-wing populism on the other. In her contribution “Populism and Fascism in Europe – Elective Affinity or Mésalliance”, the sociologist Karin Priester analyzes the interconnections and contradictions of fascism and populism as socio-political phenomena. In doing so, Priester also refers to historical material and addresses Italian Fascism and German National Socialism with respect to the above-mentioned questions about the relation between fascism and populism. The historians Stefano Cavazza and Andrea D’Onofrio choose the opposite approach. Starting out from the historical material, they explore the populist components of fascism or the ways in which it is distinguished from populism. “Was Fascism populist”? asks Cavazza, while referring to Benito Mussolini’s discourses and stagings. In fact, Mussolini used many populist elements in his political communication, both before and after having established his power. But Cavazza demonstrates that the ambivalent nature of populism was increasingly domesticated in order to hang onto power and ensure the popular legitimation of the leader. In his contribution “National Socialism and Populism” (*Nationalsozialismus und Populismus*), D’Onofrio discusses the *völkisch* aspect of National Socialism in its early phase and reassesses this in terms of the populist idealization of the people. His focus on the *völkisch* wing of the National Socialist movement and party brings to light most of all the differences between National Socialism and populism, such as the “claim to totality”, the “massive use of violence” or the racist conception of the “people” or *Volk*.

The final contributions in this issue address current right-wing populism. Giorgia Bulli analyzes the discourse and mobilization practices of Lega Nord in Italy. Bulli, who specialises in political science and communications studies, reconstructs the development of the party, and shows how Lega Nord, by constructing a homogeneous identity of the people, presents itself as an opposition to the Italian government. Lega Nord experienced different phases and switched several times between the poles of fascist ideology and populist rhetoric, without ever keeping them completely apart. It becomes clear that the fascist or populist nature of the party is determined by its degree of intensity. Finally, the linguist Martin Reislgl discusses the rhetoric of right-wing populism in Austria and of National Socialism in Germany. This diachronous comparison reveals not only differences and similarities between the discourses of the FPÖ and the NSDAP, but also the discursive borrowings of right-wing populists from National Socialist ideology. All contributions show how complex and diverse the relations between fascism and populism were and still are.

The articles collected in this issue are in part the result of a debate which has been taking place among scholars from Germany, France and Italy since 2009 in the context of the project “Populism between Fascism and Democracy” (*Populismus zwischen Faschismus und Demokratie*), funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG). The scholars met in Bologna, Berlin and on Lake Como to discuss possible theoretical and methodological propositions concerning research into populism. This would not have been possible without support from the German Research Foundation, the Maison des Sciences de l’Homme and the Villa Vigoni. We express our thanks to them and to the project members.

The editorial staff has included an additional contribution by the historian Mike Schmeitzner concerning the “Party Congress of Totality” (*Parteitag der Totalität*). He presents and comments in detail a previously unknown study by Richard Löwenthal about Hitler’s Nuremberg military display of September 1935.

Paula Diehl and Stefano Cavazza