

Movements and Ideas of the Extreme Right in Europe: Positions and Continuity

Conference held at the Nordeuropa-Institut at the Humboldt University Berlin
Berlin, 10. bis 11. Dezember 2009

The interwar fascist movements and regimes were parts of a distinct historical period: they were products of a unique crisis stemming from the cultural pessimism of the 1890s, the „nationalization of the masses” and the upheavals caused by the First World War and the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. Due to increased European integration, the development of welfare societies in the post-war period and the crimes against humanity of the fascist regimes, a revival of historical fascism seems impossible. Nevertheless, ideas and concepts fundamental to an extreme right worldview have been able to survive and adapt – in phases – to the radically changed political, social and economic climate of post-war Europe.

The recent conference was initiated and organised by research fellows Nicola Karcher and Anders G. Kjøstvedt at the University of Oslo in cooperation with Henrik-Steffens-Professor Jorunn Sem Fure at the Humboldt University Berlin, who also hosted and financed the event. Also in attendance were Professor Uwe Puschner of the Free University Berlin and Professor Ulrich Wyrwa of the Zentrum für Antisemitismusforschung/University of Potsdam. The two-day conference was organized into a chronological series of lectures, with Uwe Puschner and Ulrich Wyrwa as the initial commentators, followed by a lively discussion among the participants and the audience. The open conference was visited by other researchers, students from the various universities in Berlin, and the general public.

The host, Jorunn Sem Fure, gave a short introductory speech before the programme commenced, in which she emphasised the conference as an academic interaction between Germany and Norway, and that it is within the responsibilities of the Henrik-Steffens-Professor to encourage exchange between academic institutions in these two countries.

In the first lecture, *Johannes Zechner* (Free University Berlin/Heinrich Böll Foundation) spoke of the idea of the „German Forest”, and described how German intellectuals from around 1800 onwards have inscribed the natural entity of the forest with a multitude of cultural meanings. Zechner argued that various conceptions of the forest were related to political myths such as national identity, racial purity and social hierarchy, and that the „German forest” became a part of National Socialist state ideology after 1933, based on the pseudo-historical imagination of a special relationship between the Germanic/German people and its forests since prehistoric times. The „German forest” served as a token for a set of anti-modernist, racist and nationalist paradigms: as the opposite of progress and urban life, as the origin of the race, as the role model for social order and as the idea of a native landscape. The actual forest was merely a starting point for the cultural construction of an imagined „ideal forest”. Nevertheless, such ideas and ideals became powerful historical forces as soon as they were used to influence or to legitimize actual political decisions.

Anders G. Kjøstvedt (University of Oslo) continued with a presentation on the National Socialist movement in Weimar Berlin and its attempt to attract voters, members and activists among the working class population of the German capital. Kjøstvedt analysed the ideological ramifications of the National Socialist appeal to blue-

collar workers and how this was related to a National Social „Weltanschauung“ in general. Central to the talk was the National Socialists' aim to identify the interests of the working class with the interests of the nation, thereby replacing class struggle with a revolutionary rebirth of the national community („Volksgemeinschaft“). He argued that the National Socialists regarded their political project as the preservation and restoration of an „authentic“ labour movement which had been distorted and abused by Marxism and the Jews. Finally, Kjølsvædt presented and discussed the NSDAP's conscious strategy of projecting representatives of National Socialism into spaces hitherto unavailable to them (referred to as „Kleinarbeit“), more precisely the establishment of National Socialist cells in the workplace („Betriebszellen“).

In her paper, *Kerstin Bornholdt* (University of Oslo) discussed whether it is possible to link specific movement systems within rhythmical gymnastics, in particular the „total movement“, to specific political ideologies and practices. Rhythmical gymnastics have usually been regarded as an expression of „völkisch“ ideas and as a facilitator for National Socialist ideology and practice. Propagators of German rhythmical gymnastics in the interwar period, on the contrary, envisioned their gymnastic practice as liberation from militaristic and de-individualizing practices. Bornholdt went on to discuss the extent to which various body movements can be seen as empty vessels that can be filled with various ideological contents, and whether body movements and forms have an inherent history and a memory. Is it possible to decide whether a mass performance of gymnasts shall be understood as a synchronization of bodies that deprives the single performer of its individuality or a democratic inclusion of all participants? Is form always neutral and only contextualized and used in different ways?

Then *Matthew Worley* (University of Reading) gave a rendition of the process by which Sir Oswald Mosley came to his decision to establish the „New Party“ in February 1931, and how he perceived in fascism the wherewithal to „save“ Britain from socio-economic ruin and a possible Communist takeover. Worley outlined the evolution of Mosley's early political career and the factors that turned his political thinking towards fascism. He suggested that Mosley's belief that parliamentary democracy was unable to cope with the mounting challenges facing Britain led him to reject conventional forms of politics and thereby conceived the need for a „modern movement“ akin to those he saw emerging on the continent (Bolshevism, Fascism, National Socialism and others). Worley further examined how Mosley eventually approached fascism by explaining why it became so appealing to him in the context of 1931-32 and how Mosley misread political events in Britain and the continent during the interwar period.

Nicola Karcher (University of Oslo), in her lecture, analysed how Norwegian organisations between 1933 and 1945 collaborated with National Socialist institutions in Germany and how they tried to control Norwegians living in Germany. Karcher showed the ways in which organisations such as „Norske Nasjonalsocialister i Tyskland“ [Norwegian National Socialists in Germany] and the foreign office of the Norwegian right-wing party „Nasjonal Samling“ built up their networks, what their ideological and political approaches were and what their social structure looked like. Central to the lecture were the internal conflicts within the various organisations and how this negatively influenced the activities of Norwegian National Socialists in Germany. She discussed whether the dispute about who should hold sovereignty over the Norwegian milieu in Germany contributed to the movement remaining so heterogeneous. As Karcher stressed, this did not condemn them to obscurity however, as actors within these organisations rose to prominence during the occupation of Norway and dominated the political and social arena of the Norwegian milieu in Germany.

Thorsten Wagner (Humboldt University Berlin) addressed various fascist or National Socialist movements in Denmark during the interwar years and the years of occupation, in particular the DNSAP (Danmarks Nationalsocialistiske Arbejderparti [Danish National Socialist Workers' Party]). Although the DNSAP always had very limited popular support, Wagner focused on the connections with established political youth groups, such as „Konservativ Ungdom“ (Conservative Youth) and agrarian movements, such as „Land-

brugernes Sammenslutning” (Farmers’ Union), that captured much of the anti-modernist and anti-parliamentarian protest sentiments in Denmark. The focal point of the second part of the presentation was the role of anti-Semitism within Danish National Socialism and in Danish society in general. Wagner argued that anti-Semitism did indeed play an important role in the worldview of the DNSAP, although it was not able to make any significant political gains out of the relatively widespread cultural and social anti-Semitic sentiments in Danish society.

Day two opened with *Martin Finkenberger* (Free University Berlin) and his paper on the anti-Semitic ideologue Johann von Leers, in which he gave a brief outline of von Leers’ career before and during the Third Reich. Von Leers not only adhered to his convictions after 1945, but he also actively sought to continue publishing anti-Semitic literature by settling in the exile milieu in Buenos Aires. In the late 1950s von Leers moved to Cairo, supported above all by the Mufti of Jerusalem, El-Husseini, and here he worked as a translator and writer of Arabic propaganda directed against the state of Israel. Finkenberger then analysed and discussed the various international post-war networks von Leers was part of and what kind of influence such networks may have had. An interesting question for debate was how von Leers rationalised continuing a seemingly lost cause even after the regime he had been part of had collapsed completely.

The next lecture, by *Elisabetta Cassina Wolff* (Vestfold University College), served as an interesting parallel to the previous speech as it focused on Julius Evola and his influence on the young generation of neo-fascists in Italy after 1945. After giving a brief outline of Evola’s intellectual production from the early 1930s to the late 1950s, Wolff discussed the metamorphosis of Evola’s message in order to fit into the new political situation in post-war Italy. Wolff showed how the inner core of Evola’s political philosophy remained unchanged though some specific topics (spiritual racism and anti-Semitism) disappeared from his writings. In addition, Wolff analysed the relationship between Evola and the young Italian neo-fascists in post-war Italy, to whom Evola emerged as an icon and who identified his theories with their interpretation of a true fascist doctrine. The influence Evola exercised on the youth was first of all on an ideological plan, but it had indirect consequences also on the practical political area.

The paper presented by *Tor Espen Simonsen* (Norwegian School of Management) regrettably had to be cancelled due to Simonsen being too ill to take part.

Joël Gombin (University of Picardy Jules Verne) presented an analysis of the vote of the leader of the „Front National” (FN), Jean-Marie Le Pen, in the French presidential elections of 1995, 2002 and 2007. Gombin’s election analysis is based on multilevel modelling, which made it possible to take into account the fact that the vote for Le Pen is strongly spatialized, and an important part of his argument is the strong heterogeneity among the FN electorate. Among Gombin’s findings is that the variables explaining the turnout for Le Pen vary across time and space, in some cases greatly. The variations of the relationships between explaining variables and the vote for Le Pen are however linked to each other, and they are systematic rather than random. This makes it possible to link the vote for Le Pen to the de-industrialisation of northern France (especially in rural or peri-urban areas), the modernised or productive centres in traditionally conservative and Catholic areas of western France, and areas of high economic inequality in the Mediterranean South.

In his talk, *Felix Wiedemann* (University of Potsdam) discussed the reasons why several right-wing and „völkisch” groups have shown a deep interest in the history of European witchcraft and sympathised with the victims of the early modern witch-trials. In the first half of the 20th century such ideas were adopted by „völkisch” neo-Pagans, and after 1933 some of them became official tenets in Party organisations, advocated above all by Alfred Rosenberg and Heinrich Himmler. While in the post-war years the history of witchcraft was only of marginal scholarly and public interest, the situation has thoroughly changed with the appearance of the new social and religious movements since the 1960s. More important, however, was the emergence of

new and younger neo-Germanic groups, who tried to integrate central elements of the wider new religious discourse into their constructions of the old Germanic religion. In this sense the modern myth of the witch served as a bridge between the religious discourse of „völkisch“ and neo-Germanic groups and the general new religious movements. Additionally, witchcraft and witch-hunts are still important historical references for right-wing groups, such as the NPD.

In her paper, *Astrid Dypvik* (Newspaper „Dag og Tid“) presented Erika Steinbach and the Bund der Vertriebenen (BDV) and discussed whether she and the organization can be regarded as a voice for the radical right in Germany. The BDV has been part of a large German debate on the establishment of a new museum focusing on the expulsion of German citizens from Central and Eastern Europe at the end of the Second World War. Dypvik argued that this controversial debate shows that this part of European history is still caught between the ethos of coming to terms with the past („Vergangenheitsbewältigung“), the diplomatic relations between neighbouring countries and the positions of the radical right, who have traditionally considered the German expellees the true and forgotten victims of the Second World War. Nevertheless, Dypvik concluded that despite the NPD giving its wholehearted support for Steinbach and the BDV and the fact that they share many topoi in their considerations on the expulsion, Steinbach and the BDV should not be regarded as an actor on the radical right fringe of German society and politics.

The papers presented at the conference will be published in an anthology edited by the initiators, Karcher and Kjøstvedt, in the course of 2010.

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