

A new 'new consensus' on the definition of fascism?

or is the new consensus getting 'old'
and are we witnessing 'a new wave' in the comparative study of extremism?

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The new consensus in fascist studies: a brief history

- First postulated in my Preface to the text anthology *International Fascism: Theories, Causes and the New Consensus* (1998)
- Suggested 9 years after Tim Mason asked ‘whatever happened to fascism?’ and after 50 years of post-war history in which historians generally either ignored the concept of generic fascism, underlined how impossible it was to define, or denied it any ideological coherence apart from its ‘negations’ (major exceptions Mosse, Payne, Sternhell)
- E.g. in 1992 the authors of a historical dictionary of fascisms could still assert without fear of contradiction that ‘no universally accepted definition of the fascist phenomenon exists, no consensus, *no matter how slight*, as to its range, its ideological origins, or the modalities of action which characterize it’ (P. Milza and S. Berstein, *Dictionnaire historique des fascismes et du nazisme* (Brussels, Editions Complexe, 1992, p. 7) My emphasis.

What I claimed in the Preface

- I suggested that a convergence of opinion or 'common sense' was beginning to emerge among both major theorists of generic fascism and specialists working on specific aspects of it (Nazism, Fascism), that it is to be treated on a par with other major political ideologies (e.g. liberalism) rather than as a special case defined primarily in terms of its negations, organizational forms, and style.
- I accepted that many representatives of an older generation of scholars would doubtless persist in seeing fascism as essentially nihilistic, barbaric, reactionary, anti-modern, lacking an ideology and purely action-oriented, as basically (petty) bourgeois, or as definable exclusively in terms of style, tactics, and organization.
- But I held that within the emerging consensus it was understood that "like conservatism, anarchism, liberalism, or ecologism, fascism is definable as an ideology with a specific 'positive', utopian vision of the ideal state of society, a vision which can assume a number of distinctive forms determined by local circumstances while retaining a core matrix of axioms."

The palingenetic core of fascism

In the General Introduction I argue that there is a perceptibly growing scholarly agreement about what that 'core of axioms' is, namely that fascism can be broadly characterized as an ideology with:

- i) its own revolutionary (palingenetic) and modernizing agenda which sets it apart from authoritarian forms of both conservatism and capitalism, and also conditions what fascism is against (the fascist 'anti-' dimension) and hence becomes the targets of its destructiveness and oppression;
- ii) a drive towards mobilizing the energies of all those considered authentic members of the national community, something which sets it apart from right-wing military regimes content to impose the new order from above without a genuine social revolution, whatever pseudo-populist façade they erect to legitimize themselves (para-fascism);
- iii) an organic concept of the nation which, certainly in the inter-war period, rejected dynastic tradition and liberal rationalism in favour of the charismatic energies seen in the leader cult and in the pervasive use of theatrical and ritual elements in politics

Several points to note

- I never claimed *originality* for my approach but instead stressed my influences: it was the element of growing consensus that I felt was new
- I never claimed *unanimity* for the interpretation of generic fascism as a political force with a relatively coherent ideologically conceived vision of ultranationalist (which can subsume racist conceptions of the nation) revolution/ regeneration. Rather I emphasized its fragile, emergent nature (in any case all theories are contested in the human sciences since unanimity is impossible)

- I never claimed fascism was *an exclusively ideological phenomenon* or reducible to ideas and myths: I stressed the ideological component i) because that is the standard approach to political isms (their history as specific phenomena is treated as manifestations of a generic ism) and ii) generic fascism had so often been denied a 'positive' ideology of any coherence or assumed to be 'reactionary' /backward-looking
- I never suggested that the theory of generic fascism is *more important* than understanding the practice of particular fascist movements or regimes, only that the nature and practice (not 'essence') of such regimes and movements cannot fully disclose itself without an adequate conceptual framework/generic definition applied heuristically

The empirical imperative

- I have been widely accused of prioritizing theory/ concepts/ ideas/ the generic/ the nomothetic) over empirical reality/ the ideographic. However, the concluding paragraph reads:

“A final piece of advice to the user of this book. ‘Grey, grey is all theory’ exclaims Goethe in expressing Faust's longing for the understanding which comes from ‘lived’ experience. Unfortunately, generic fascism cannot be conceptualized, let alone comprehended, unless it is investigated with an appropriate theoretical apparatus. Nevertheless, students who use this book are urged to study as much as possible of the ‘real’ history of specific fascisms (i.e. examples of the ideology they produce and accounts of the actions they have given rise to). Only in this way can they see how useful those conceptual tools really are, and have access to the curious cognitive and emotional experience of at least partially understanding fascism from the inside, even if it remains anathema to everything they personally stand for.”

The broadening of the consensus since *International Fascism* (1998)

- Numerous historians of areas related to fascism operate working definitions convergent with the one outlined in *International Fascism* with or without direct influence by my work
- E.g. Steven Shenfield on Russian fascism; Roger Eatwell in his history of fascism; Philip Morgan on inter-war fascism; Tom Linehan and Nigel Copsey on British fascism;* Sven Reichardt in his comparative study of the *squadristi* and the SA; Mark Antliff on 'avant-garde fascism' in France; Andreas Umland and Anton Shekhovstov in their work on neofascism in post-Soviet Russia; James Shields on extreme right in France, Gregory Maertz in his work on 10,000 recently discovered Nazi paintings, many with 'modernist' stylistic or technical elements; Aristotle Kallis on the diffusion of genocidal projects; Ruth Ben-Ghiat on Fascist modernities; Emily Braun on Fascist modernist art; Emilio Gentile on the political religion of Fascism, Franz Lothar Kroll on the ideology of the Nazi leaders etc., etc.
- *A sign of the times is that Cambridge PhD student Gary Love won the 2008 George Mosse Prize for his JCH article on the BUF based directly on my variant of the new consensus

Its tacit acceptance even by critics of the 'Griffin' school of fascist studies

Perhaps more significantly a number of critics (ranging from mild to belligerent) of my theory of the new consensus operate definitions which are self-evidently akin to/compatible with it:

- 'Fascism 'is a tortured, enraged, and passionate demand for national renewal'. It is 'unqualifiedly nationalist, redemptive, renovative, and aggressive'. (A. James Gregor, 1999)
- The core of fascism's ideas and myths is racial evolution embodying rebirth from an existing condition of subjection, decadence or 'degeneracy' leading to the 'creation of [...] a "new fascist man"'. (Martin Blinkhorn, 2000)
- Fascism is a 'form of political behaviour marked by obsessive preoccupation with community decline, humiliation, or victimhood and by compensator cults of unity, energy, and purity, in which a mass-based party of committed nationalist militants [...] pursues with redemptive violence [...] goals of internal cleansing and external expansion'. (Robert Paxton, 2004)
- 'Fascism is the pursuit of transcendent and cleansing nation-statism through paramilitarism.' (Michael Mann, 2004)

Other unwitting subscribers to the new consensus

- Ian Kershaw, 'The Uniqueness of Nazism', *Journal of Contemporary History* 2004: 'If this explosive mixture of the *'charismatic' politics of national salvation* and the apparatus of a highly modern state was central to Nazism's uniqueness, then it ought to be possible to distinguish the unholy combination from the differing preconditions of other dictatorships. This, however briefly and superficially, I shall try to *do...The quest for national rebirth lay, of course, at the heart of all fascist movements*. But only in Germany did the striving for national renewal adopt such strongly pseudo-religious tones.
- Arnd Bauerkämper, highly dismissive of the idea of a new consensus in 'A New Consensus? Recent Research on Fascism in Europe, 1918–1945' (*History Compass*, Vol. 4, March 2006), still accepts that fascism pursued the goal of *'radical political cultural renewal under reactionary auspices* and took the historical stage as a community bound together by oath to form a missionary, masculine league of warriors' (*Der Faschismus in Europa 1918-1945*, p. 42)

Another indirect confirmation?

- Wolfgang Wippermann, *Faschismus* (2009), p. 256
- ‘Den Begriff einer (nationalen) “Widergeburt” findet man in der Ideologie nahezu aller Faschismen. Der britische Faschismusforscher Roger Griffin will in diesem Ideologem das zentrale Kennzeichen des Faschismus sehen, den er daher als “palingenetischen”, das heisst auf eine nationale Wiedergeburt abzielende Widergeburt abzielenden “Ultranationalismus” definiert. Dies greift doch mit Sicherheit zu kurz. Faschismus kann nicht nur mit dem Hinweis auf ein ideologisches Element erklart werden’. Wippermann distinguishes between (klassischem) Faschismus, bonapartisch-faschistisch (‘Faschismus von oben’) and fundamentalistisch-fascistisch (klerischer F., Islamo-f)

The emergence of a new new consensus? (The New Wave)

Now that the new consensus is 'old hat', I believe scholarly attention should turn instead to what can be identified as a major new development in this field of studies: the emergence of a 'new wave' of interdisciplinary research which suggests a productive synergy is possible of 'new consensus' perspectives (not 'my theory') with adjacent areas of research into such areas as:

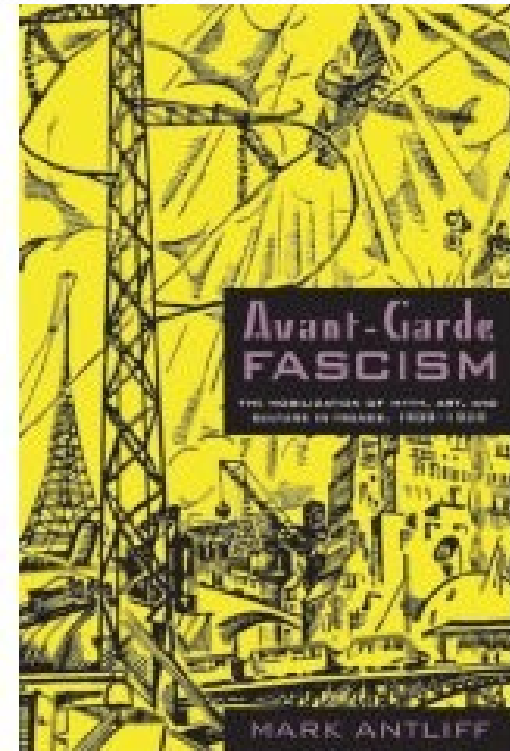
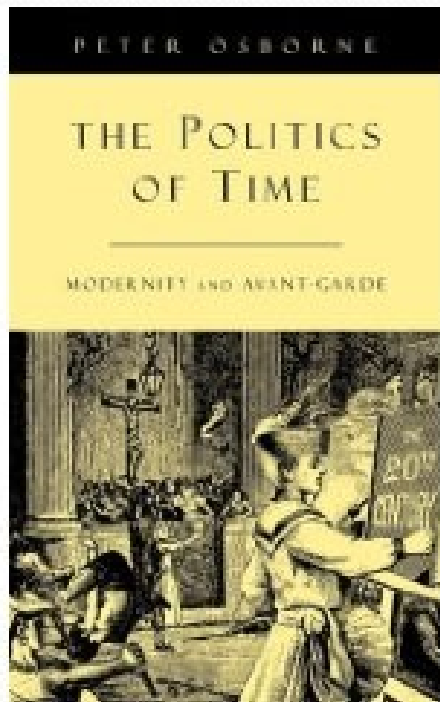
- The experience of time and history in a secularizing society/ re-enchantment and resacralization within a 'post-secular' society
- Political religion (both sacralized politics and politicized religion)
- Totalitarianism (as regime and as *movement* pursuing a temporalized utopia)
- Biopolitics and politicized eugenics as an international palingenetic discourse of social engineering left, right and centre
- The comparative study of genocide and mass murder
- Modernism as a form of attempted socio-cultural re-enchantment
- Contemporary terrorism as the implementation of (secular or religious) utopias of an alternative modernity

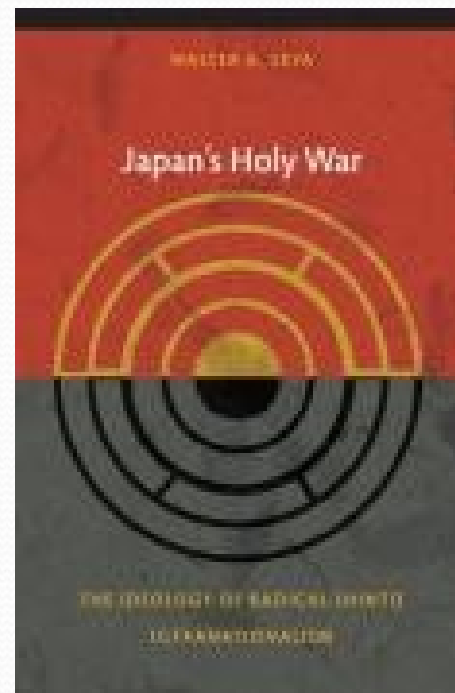
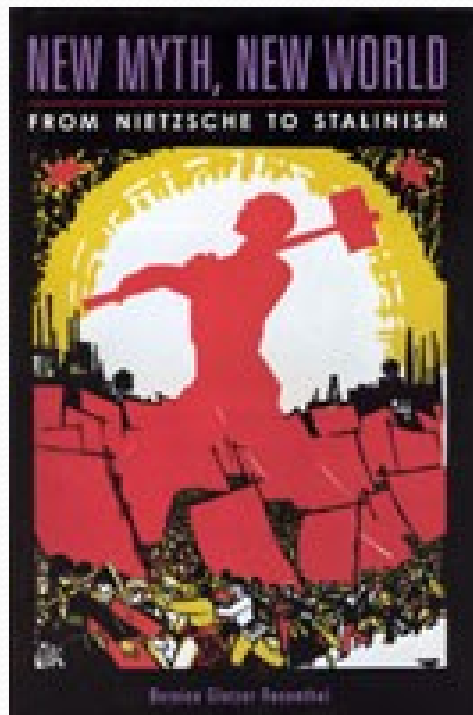
The implications of the new wave for understanding the 'radical right'

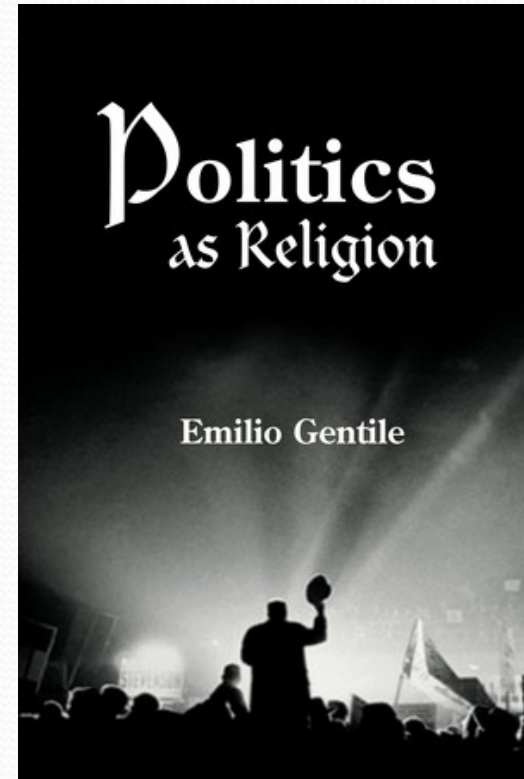
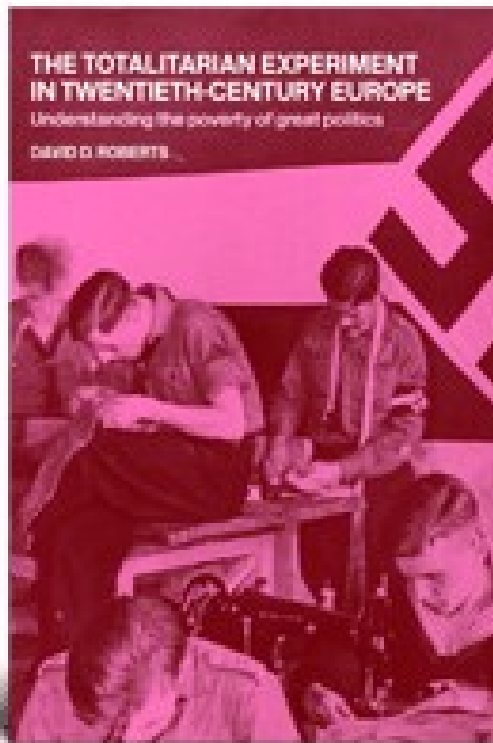
- Tim Mason in 1989 recognized that Nazism was part of 'something much larger' which he assumed was fascism 'as a continental phenomenon'. The development I am highlighting opens the prospect of locating individual forms of 'extremism', **including fascism**, within 'something much larger', and not just 'continental', i.e. European ('Anti-Enlightenment' a European phenomenon, but parallel phenomena wherever globalizing modernity impacts on traditional society)
- Exclusive preoccupation with defining and telling the story of generic fascism, totalitarianism, extremism, the radical right, ultranationalism, negative eugenics, genocide, political religion, fundamentalism, neo-populism as exclusive concepts etc. produces a sort of 'tunnel vision'
- Openness to the new wave I am postulating promises to maintain a healthy dialectic between specialist studies (the idiographic) and an intelligent concern with generic terms and explanatory models (the nomothetic) used in **heuristic and not reductionist spirit**, with a **cluster of terms being used in a cluster** where appropriate.

- This will enable the refinement of the historicization of the 'radical right' by locating its many variants within the broader history of wider phenomena, both inside and outside Europe through comparative studies informed by sophisticated conceptualization
- Both the taxonomy of the 'radical right' and the understanding of the **genesis and praxis** of its individual manifestations can be refined through a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between revolutionary nationalism (e.g. 'classic' fascism) and such phenomena as cultural modernism; technocracy; totalitarianism of the left and the right; the politics of authoritarian/ reactionary conservatism/ 'fascism from above',/parafascism; 'ethnocratic' perversions of liberalism (neo-populism) which have abandoned revolutionary projects; 'fundamentalist' and new religions.

Examples of the 'new wave': books



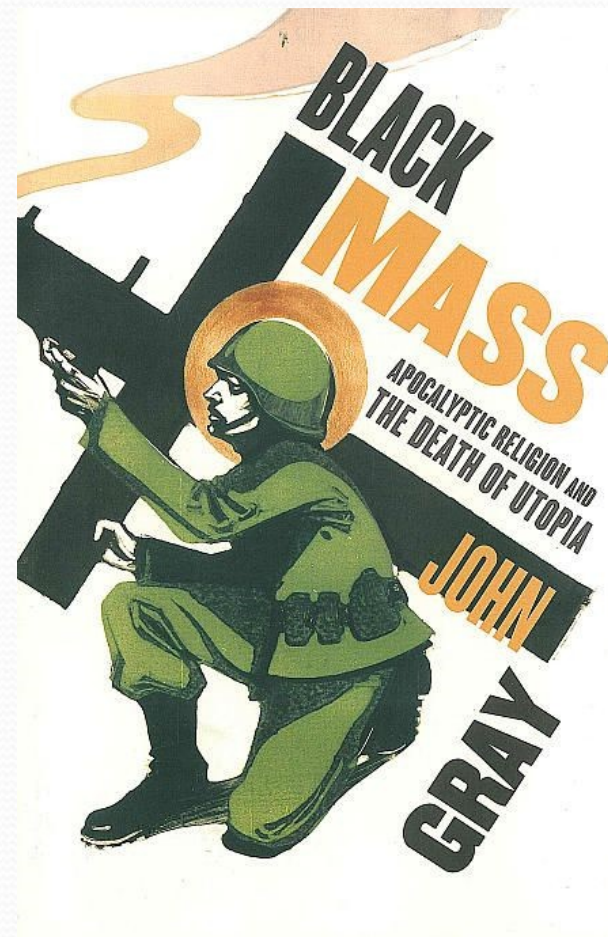




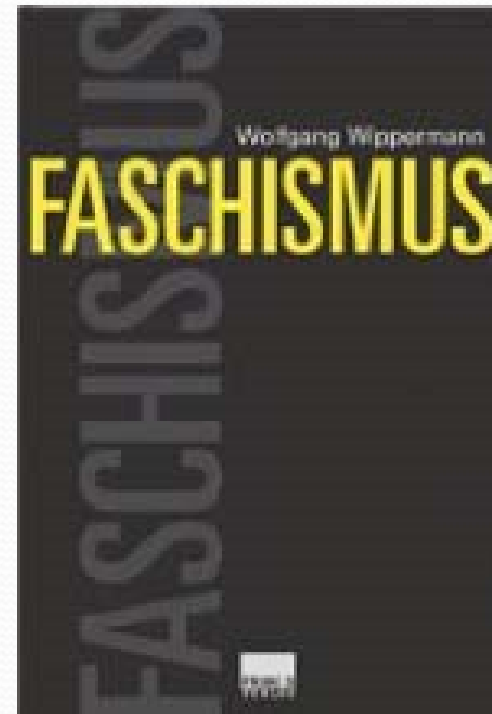
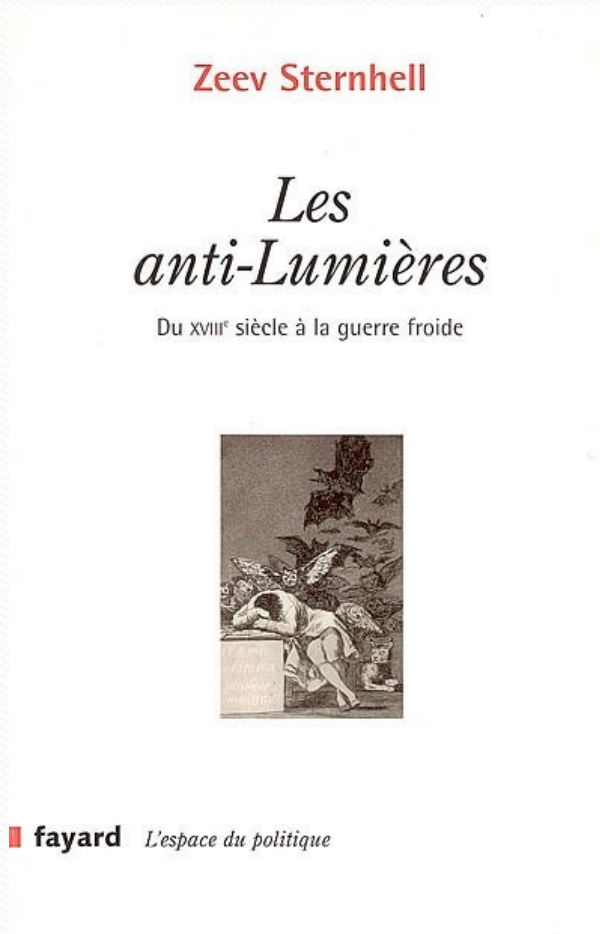
Genocide and Fascism

The Eliminationist Drive in Fascist Europe

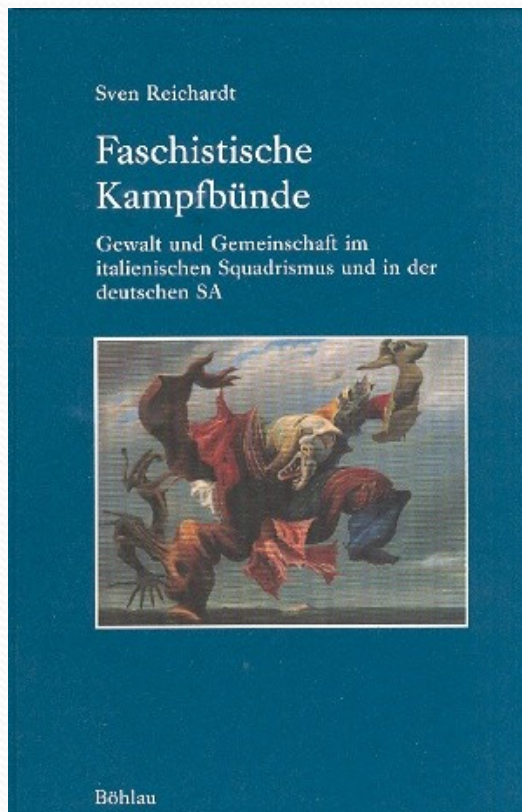
Aristotle Kallis



Two works which locate fascism/radical right in a wider European/global context (2006/2009)



Two 'weiterfuehrende' works of comparative fascist studies in German



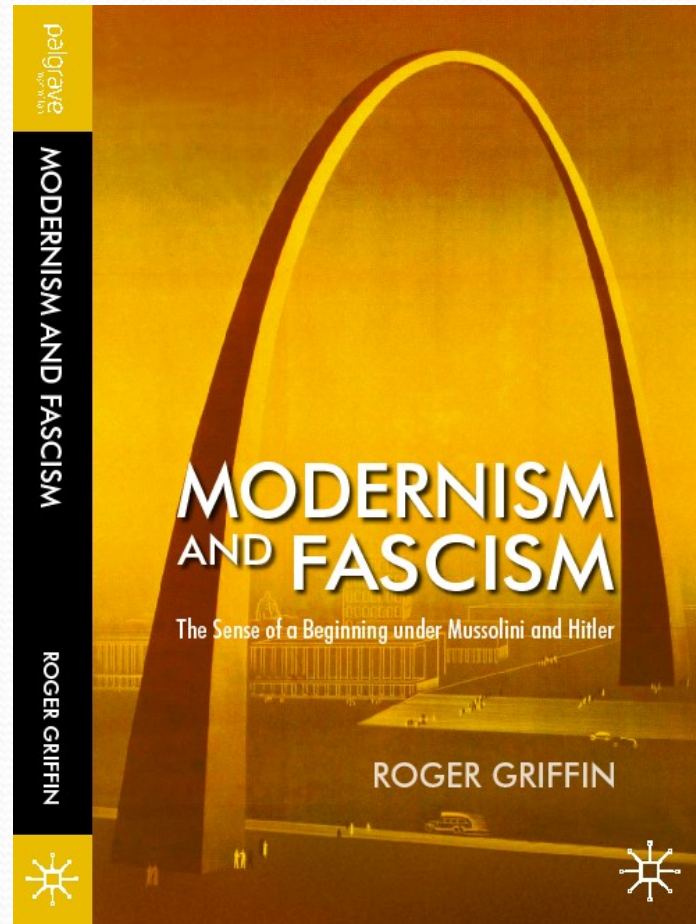
Examples of the New Wave mentality: projects

- The RICH initiative in South Korea (Jie-Hyun Lim) investigating the nature of dictatorship in relation to totalitarian movements and regimes in Asia and Europe, including their ritual, semiotic dimension
- The project set up at Aarhus by Mehdi Mozzaffari to investigate the relationship between European totalitarianism and Islamism using an international network of academics
- A conference held in Paris by Traian Sandu (April 2009) exploring how far the 'new consensus' can be applied to understanding fascism in 'peripheral' European states (e.g. in Eastern Europe and Scandinavia)
- The conference to be held in Konstanz in November 2009 on 'Political Fascisms and Cultural Modernity'
- A conference on the comparative study of parafascist regimes held in Lisbon November 2009 by Antonio Costa Pinto
- Marius Turda's project to produce *The Encyclopaedia of Eugenic Movements in Central and Southeastern Europe, 1914-1954*
- The 2009 Greifswald conference on extremism

Two aspects of the radical right highlighted by my variant of the 'new consensus'/contribution to 'new wave':

- The post-1945 evolution of fascism and xenophobia
- The ideological and organizational evolution of fascism since 1945 due to the disappearance of the inter-war habitat conducive to mass mobilization by utopias of an alternative modernity: this triggers metapoliticization/ Europeanization/ internationalization of fascism
- The failure of fascism as a mass or paramilitary party-political movement also encourages the fragmentation into separate aspects: party-political formations/extra-parliamentary formations/ideological production
- Under these conditions new forms of revolutionary right have arisen: Eurofascism, neo-Nazism, cyberfascism, negationism/ revisionism, International Third Positionism, New Right, black terrorism, neopopulist (and pseudo-neopopulist), white noise (cf forthcoming article by Anton Shekhovtsov in *Patterns of Prejudice* on 'apoliteic' music)
- Illuminating post-1945 trajectories: Alain de Benoist; Marco Tarchi; Aleksandr Dugin; Troy Southgate; Nick Griffin

2 The complex relationship of the radical right to modernity and modernism



Basic argument of this book:

- Ideological extremism of fascism and communism in inter-war period, post-war variants of fascism, and some forms of terrorism (where urgent and concrete socio-political issues are not involved) can be seen as bids to restore sacred canopy and meaning to a modern world threatened by the loss of a spiritual dimension or by imposition of an alien spirituality.
- As such they can be interpreted as forms of 'programmatically modernism' (as opposed to 'epiphanic modernism') pursuing utopias of an alternative modernity.
- Even Islamism has 'modernized' Islam in its war against the threat of a demonized 'West'
- In the context of this book the 'new wave' promises progress towards a more complete, multidisciplinary understanding of 'revolts against the modern world' based on methodological empathy with the innate human drive to find deeper sources of meaning, identity, and **agency** under the conditions of modernity, and on greater sensitivity towards the way the norms of Western society can be themselves experienced as extreme in certain conditions.

Postscript: the need to continually monitor the evolution/morphological adaptations of right-wing extremism to history as it unfolds:

1 The thoughts of an Auschwitz survivor

- A new fascism, with its trail of intolerance, of abuse, and of servitude, can be born outside our country and imported into it, walking on tiptoe and calling itself by other names, or it can loose itself from without with such violence that it routs all defences. At that point, wise counsel no longer serves, and one must find the strength to resist. Even in this contingency, the memory of what happened in the heart of Europe, not very long ago, can serve as a warning and support.

[*If this is a man* (Sphere Books, London, 1987), 396-7.]

2 The thoughts of a liberal humanist

- Neither 'fascism' or 'racism' will do us the favour of returning in such a way that we can recognize them easily. If vigilance was only a game of recognizing something already well-known, then it would only be a question of remembering. Vigilance would be reduced to a social game using reminiscence and identification by recognition, a consoling illusion of an immobile history peopled with events which accord to our expectations or our fears.
- Pierre-André Taguieff, 'Discussion or Inquisition: The Case of Alain de Benoist', *Telos* 98-99, (Winter 1993-Spring 1994), p. 54.

3 The thoughts of a neo-fascist

- The single party, the secret police, the public displays of Caesarism, even the presence of a Führer are not necessarily attributes of fascism. [...] The famous fascist methods are constantly revised and will continue to be revised. More important than the mechanism is the idea which fascism has created for itself of man and freedom. [...] With another name, another face, and with nothing which betrays the projection from the past, with the form of a child we do not recognize and the head of a young Medusa, the Order of Sparta will be reborn: and paradoxically it will, without doubt, be the last bastion of Freedom and the sweetness of living.
- Maurice Bardèche, *Qu'est-ce que le fascisme?* (Paris: Les Sept Couleurs, 1961), pp. 175-176.

Conclusion

- The new consensus and new wave applied to studies of extremism 'left and right' open up the prospect of being able to track the constant evolution in the forms taken by the revolt against liberal democracy/revolt against an increasingly globalized 'West' even when the 21st century forms they assume contrast profoundly with the one familiar from inter-war Europe.
- I can supply further references or published material relating to this interpretation of the topic if requested by email

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