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Radicalised Conservatism

An Analysis

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Eine Analyse)

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Introduction

Time is dying. Soon it will be buried.

In the East they are already constructing the coffin.

You want to enjoy it?

A cemetery is no amusement park.

Erich Kästner

The world has gone off the rails. The emotional state of emergency seems to have become normality. This sentiment has only been reinforced by the pandemic with its very real states of emergency – but the cracks were there before. Some very fine and barely perceptible, others gaping. Some days it feels as if the world, in both senses of the word, has gone crazy. Things no longer match up.

How can it be that messages spread by a US president on social media have to come with a warning label because he is simply spreading falsehoods about the outcome of an election? Why is a conservative chancellor and his closest circle in Austria suddenly adopting the language of the Identitarians? What has actually happened?

We are living in a time in which certainties that have long been taken for granted are disappearing. This is also due to a multitude of crises that overlap and reinforce each other. The aftermath of the financial and economic crisis of 2008 is far from over, the climate crisis is a constant companion, and finally a health crisis, the Corona pandemic, paralysed public life for weeks and then many months – but at the same time, like an accelerant, further fuelled existing inequalities.

Due to the change in media and the influence of ever new social media platforms, these crises are now considered global with political events being communicated in real time. This also puts pressure on the hitherto valid way in which party politics and communication have been conducted. Alongside the established media, a multitude of blogs, online journals and even individual large accounts on Twitter, Instagram or Facebook – without a publisher, editor-in-chief or editorial staff – have emerged. The prerogative of established and recognised journalists to report is dwindling. Online communities and alliances have emerged that would not have been possible without social media. These include new social movements like Black Lives Matter, #metoo or the climate protection movement. But this dynamic does not only exist on the left. In the last five years, large right-wing to extreme right-wing or even fascist online communities have formed on both sides of the Atlantic.

In the face of these developments, many parties have stuck to their old ways. This applies in particular to the state-supporting parties, which for many years saw themselves as representing the centre. People like to write about the crisis of social democracy. Conservative parties, however, have no less serious problems. The strengthening of the New Right has led to a process of erosion within the conservative milieu. Enormous pressure has arisen to face up to this challenge. Should we distance ourselves from the extra-parliamentary discourse of right-wing extremism? Or adopt its positions as one's own? Nowhere was this more evident in the German-speaking world than in the question of how to deal with the “refugee crisis” in 2015/16. While one part of the conservative milieu (both inside and outside parliament) tried to find solutions in consensus with other social stakeholders, another radicalised itself and successively popularised positions that had previously only been heard on the extreme right. Five years later, the Austrian chancellor's party, the ÖVP, is also talking in press releases about changing the majority situation in the country by means of mass immigration. This statement is strikingly reminiscent of the conspiracy myth of the “Great Exchange” propagated by the Identitarian movement in 2015/16.

This dynamic exists not only in Europe, but also in the USA. The permanent horror at the often inhumane actions of Donald Trump, who succeeded in being elected president of the United States of America in 2016, became the norm, and the fairy tale spread that no one could have foreseen this. That is not true, of course. The developments were foreseeable, and lucid observers foresaw them.

What we are dealing with here is a new phenomenon: radicalised conservatism. How has it managed, in a very short time, to transform the political and media arena in which we act, think, discuss? In order to clarify with which ideologies it is related and against which it demarcates itself, it is worthwhile to first look at the development of “classical” conservatism and related currents.

A Retrospective

Conservative Movements

Conservatism is one of the three major political ideologies that emerged with the rise of the modern nation-states and nationalism in the 18th and 19th centuries respectively. It has its social basis in the bourgeoisie. The preservation of existing conditions, in both a material and an ideological sense, is its most important goal. It has therefore stood in opposition against the values of enlightenment liberalism, as it emerged over the course of the French Revolution, and at the same time against (revolutionary) socialism, which questioned property and wealth relations.

Conservatism is not merely a defensive or counter-ideology, rather it has an ideological inventory of its own. Central to this is the idea that inequality is inevitably essential for society to function. Clear hierarchies stabilise the social order. If this system becomes unbalanced, crises arise. Conservative anti-egalitarianism is equally at odds with the ideological and material ideas of the value of equality espoused by liberalism and socialism: neither are all people equal, nor is there an inseparable unity between the values of Freedom, Equality and Fraternity.

Hierarchy instilled at birth is thus an integral part of conservative ideology. This is most evident in the world of work, where the different occupational categories, namely labour and capital, both have their own specific role: they are complementary and do not come into conflict with one another. Alongside this idea of class harmony, as with liberalism, there is an emphasis on the importance of private property and its protection, and – on an ideological level, again in contrast with liberalism and socialism – a systematic anti-rationalist sentiment: religious faith is at the very least equal to, if not superior to, human reason. In short, then, by conservatism we mean an anti-egalitarian, anti-revolutionary, class-harmonising attitude whose highest values are order and property. Fascism and National Socialism are much younger than conservatism, liberalism and socialism. These two terms refer to the political trends that developed following the First World War. Underlying them is an anti-democratic, anti-socialist, anti-liberal, but not anti-revolutionary ideology that can manifest as a movement, party or state. At the heart of this is a warlike, militarised worldview. Every aspect of life is seen as the arena of an endless struggle. History takes place as a dramatic process in which a group – a people or a nation –

has to assert itself against hostile forces. To achieve this effect, it must be organised accordingly.

Fascism and National Socialism differ from conservatism in their decidedly socially transformative, and in some respects revolutionary character. In contrast to conservatism, they are not attempting either to (merely) preserve or (reactionarily) to restore an old regime, but to move forward into a future that is, however, fundamentally conceived in reference to a (fictitious) mythologised past. This myth is both a central point of reference and of self-identification. It feeds the idea of a fascist utopia that is to be realised through the reconstruction of society – along ethnic, nationalist, cultural and biological determinants.

There are wide and heated discussions about the correct definition of fascism and how it relates to National Socialism. Often the similarities are emphasised; from this perspective, National Socialism appears as an extreme form of fascism. Proponents of a very narrow definition of fascism say that the term is only applicable to the state rule of Italian fascism (1922-1945). However, this makes it a mere proper title for this concrete historical phenomenon – the dictatorship of the “Duce” Benito Mussolini – and it cannot be applied to similar, contemporaneous phenomena or to current movements, parties and organisations. Conversely, it is important not to attempt too broad a definition, under which every phenomenon of the (extreme) political right falls, as “fascism” then becomes a purely horrifying term that no longer allows for any meaningful precision.

Sharpness of definition is also necessary when using the term “National Socialism” in order to grasp the differentiation and the strategic realignments of the extreme right. To label everything with the striking labels “fascist” or “national socialist” is only a hindrance. The differences from fascism most frequently cited in research are a rabid and eliminatory anti-Semitism, the prominent role of pseudo-scientific racism, and the singular break with civilisation of the Holocaust or the Shoah.

There are again convincing arguments against the view that National Socialism can (simply) be understood as an (extreme) form of fascism. The focus here is less on ideological differences than on the divergences in practice resulting from material conditions (the highly technology developed Germany had different possibilities than, for example, the much less industrialised Romania) and the balance of power within the fascist or National Socialist parties and movements.

The rabid Anti-Semitism of National Socialism stands out among a whole series of characteristics that derive from an ideology of radical inequality and a related inequivalence. Anti-Semitism plays a role in varying degrees of radicalism in almost every manifestation of fascism and derives from centuries of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism in Europe. In addition, however, there are other shared ideologemes of inequality and inequivalence that are based on ethnic ideas of race, such as antiziganism or anti-Slavic racism. In addition, there are social inequality criteria such as disability, illness and social deprivation (such as drunkenness). This results in biopolitical concepts that are supposed to regulate reproduction with the help of sterilisation, methods of eugenics or racial laws and (in extreme cases through euthanasia) guarantee “public health”. In addition, a radical gender dichotomy is inherent in all manifestations of fascism: women are primarily assigned the task of ensuring the reproduction of the people, which can only grow through the birth of “racially” desirable children. The constant threat to the “people”, the “nation”, the “race” leads to a state of siege that is conceived as permanent and which must be resisted through war and conquest. The expansion of the “Lebensraum” (living space) for one’s own “people” thus becomes an act of defence and prevention in fascist thinking.

The social basis of fascism is a discontented petty bourgeoisie and civil servants who, in a time of crisis, turn against the ruling powers at the top as well as against a (revolutionary) proletariat at the bottom, out of fear of social decline and the loss of cultural influence and traditional values. Over time, fascism becomes a multi-class coalition that also includes parts of the proletariat as well as decisive factions of the upper bourgeoisie and aristocracy. They rally under the promise of an ethno-nationalist restructuring of society with the corresponding exclusion of groups defined as not belonging.

The relationship between conservatism and fascism is precarious – neither are they at cross purposes with each other, nor do they lie on the same line. Both are oriented towards clear orders and hierarchies (between the sexes, in working life, etc.), anti-egalitarian and anti-socialist. But besides such overlaps, there are significant differences. Conservatism is an ideology of domination to secure existing (property) relations. Fascism is an ideology that – through a (certain) exchange of the power elites – wants to overcome the existing political order.

Fascism rejects the emancipation movements of modernity, which links it to conservatism, but unlike the latter it has a strong affinity with technological progress, not least in terms of the use of modern propaganda techniques. Religion has a very different status in the various fascist movements – whether out of conviction or calculation. For conservatism, however, this element

is non-negotiable: the anti-rational affect here feeds directly from a religious worldview. In fascism, on the other hand, it follows from a metaphysical exaltation of the idea of the people, which goes hand in hand with the promise of a (supra-individual) immortality. Peter Berghoff has called it “profane transcendence”.

The Disorder of the (Political) World

In (historical) praxis, political phenomena can rarely be observed in their pure form. Individuals, organisations and historical moments are shaped by a variety of influences – ideologies, the material circumstances of the time (economic crises, currency collapses, famines, pandemics, wars), mass dynamics or the interests of individuals involved. If you look at historical moments or processes through a single lens, no matter how sharply you focus, the result is always a distorted picture. Reality is complex and messy. It does not conform to theoretical models, descriptions and definitions.

Accordingly, in addition to spectra that are grouped around central ideological elements, a whole series of half-spectra or mixed spectra exist in reality. These include, for example, liberal-conservative parties or social-liberal movements. The history of social democracies in many countries is marked by the absorption and abandonment of various elements. The development of the Greens also follows the attempt to combine different ideologies under one bracket (ecology). The situation is no different within the conservative and extreme right spectrum. In addition to fascism in power, there were and are a variety of fascist currents and organisations, some of which were and are in conflict with each other. Some are influenced by liberal or neoliberal ideas, others are reactionary or monarchist, and still others emerged from conservatism. The question of how they differ from each other is often difficult to answer, even for scholars. Often this interest in knowledge is strongly overlaid by political sensitivities. Instead of trying to separate the individual currents analytically and neatly from related phenomena in order to build a partition wall between them, it is important to take a closer look at these fluid intersections and to name them precisely.

As already mentioned, one can point out such junctures between all kinds of movements. This does not mean that they each have the same relevance in the respective intersecting areas. For example, the attempts of the Nazi revolutionaries to link socialism and nationalism with each other – also theoretically – were interesting but straightforward and were mainly undertaken by

the extreme right. The intersection between fascism and conservatism, on the other hand, requires a closer look, since both actively come together here.

[...]

Radicalised Conservatism

By radicalised conservatism I mean a transformation of existing major conservative parties. These are parties with a long tradition and chequered history that do not focus on individual social groups but find support in different factions of the middle classes and/or entrepreneurs as well as in rural communities, among white-collar workers, academics or in parts of the workforce, Catch-all parties that aim to appeal to as many different people as possible, similar to what social democracy tries to do a little further to the left in the political spectrum. Both camps – centre-left and centre-right – had agreed on a post-war consensus, which of course has to be renegotiated again and again, but was based on an agreement in principle: conservatives and employers on the one hand, social democracy and workers as well as trade unions on the other recognised the balance of power existing between them and did not try with all their might to push through their respective goals and interests against those of the other side. In Austria, this consensus manifested itself in the social partnership, the term used for the cooperation between employers' and employees' associations; conflicts were to be resolved and settled through a reconciliation of interests. In Germany, the concept of the social market economy in particular represents such a search for balance.

This consensus has always been fragile and has been broken time and again, for example during Margaret Thatcher's time as Prime Minister in Britain or during the reform governments under the Social Democratic Chancellor Bruno Kreisky in Austria. Both implemented their plans without regard for the respective opposing parties. With Thatcher this meant the bloody crushing of the powerful British trade unions and the lasting desolation of working-class towns and communities; with Kreisky it meant a fundamental modernisation of the education system and the lasting integration of the upwardly mobile and prosperous workers. Otherwise, the post-war consensus was more or less adhered to. In Austria it even manifested itself in the form of a grand coalition that governed continuously until 1966 and then again from 1987. In 2000, however, it was broken a second time when the ÖVP formed a government with Jörg Haider's

FPÖ. After the SPÖ and ÖVP got back together in 2007, the grand coalition lost more and more support among the population until Sebastian Kurz finally broke with this form of partnership.

In the two-party system in the USA, the development was a little different. In principle, however, there was a consensus that US presidents came from the established political system. Presidents had previously been governors, senators or vice presidents. Those who were outside the political system, like the former actor Ronald Reagan, had to work their way up the ranks for at least a few years, Reagan as governor of California, for example. This common parenthesis, for all its political and ideological breakpoints, was not broken. There were many of these: Reagan with his neoliberal Reaganomics, acting in tandem with Thatcherism in Britain. Or the Afghanistan campaign, the domestic anti-terror measures and the third Gulf War under George W. Bush. However, bipartisanship was always invoked, i.e. the willingness of both parties to put aside certain differences for the good of the country, to compromise and to take important decisions together.

Thus, even many Democrat parliamentarians (such as the current President Joe Biden) voted in favour of the wars and restrictions on fundamental rights in the name of fighting terror. The first real and clearly visible break – habitually, in the understanding of politics and in political practice – was Donald Trump, although this had already become apparent in the Obama years with the emergence of the Tea Party as an ultra-conservative grassroots movement.

Radicalised conservatism is both a rupture and a continuity of the developments that preceded it. The conservative party unilaterally renounces the (precarious) consensus with the more left-wing state-supporting party – the (historically) organised labour movement. However, radicalised conservatism does not fall from the sky. Conservative parties do not randomly burst forth into radicalism. They can smoulder within the party for years and then become visible with harshness, audacity and due to lack of internal resistance. Neither Trump nor Kurz were random phenomena.

[...]