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Fascism and Anti-fascism in our time: Critical Investigations

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In light of the recent surge in nationalist and authoritarian movements in Europe and around the world, “Mapping Memories“, an event programme of the German Federal Agency for Civic Education, organised a conference in Hamburg & Lüneburg from 1-3 November 2017 discussing the potential for histories of fascism and anti-fascism to provide insight into this surge today. Enrico Cavalieri was present at the event and updated EUROCLIO on the main highlights.

A very interesting three-day conference took place in the Institute of Social Research of Hamburg and the University of Lüneburg from the 1st to the 3rd of November 2017. The main goal: analyse the categories of fascism and antifascism and understand how far they can be useful to explain the rise of authoritarian movements (and governments) today. The issue was approached both through an examination of particular case-studies (such as Poland, Ukraine, United States and the Soviet Union) and by looking at fascism and antifascism in their international-related dimension, such as the so-called global fascism.

The use of both approaches was evident since the keynote lecture, held by Geoff Eley from University of Michigan. Contextualising historical fascism in the interwar period, it's possible to de-contextualise some issues of it and use them to interpret our times' nationalisms, asking which are the distances and continuities between the world in the 1930s and today, such as the fascism-provoking effects of economic crises.

The rich program of lectures and discussions went on with the historical analysis of fascism, trying to avoid the classical views in order to show the audience less common perspectives and cases, such as Women and fascism between the wars, by Julie Gottlieb from the University of Sheffield, and Fascism, Anticolonial Nationalism and Indigenism, through which Benjamin Zachariah (from Trier University) talked about the links between anticolonial Indian nationalism and Nazi-fascist agencies present in India in the 30s, especially through the use of race and *volk* as operative categories, trying to widen the often eurocentric theories and speeches about fascism.

Antifascism was similarly examined from a historical perspective, with the interesting case study of The Soviet Union and Antifascism, by Jochen Hellbeck of Rutgers University, and the thought-provoking question Is There Such a Thing as Conservative Antifascism?, by James Chappel (Duke University), a difficult task, especially if there is not a consensus on the meaning of “conservative”. In economic terms? Religious? Ethical?

The Conference went on to analyse the politics of memory in some European countries, such as Hungary and Ukraine. I found the speech of Cornelia Siebeck about the facing of the double dictatorship memory in the post-wall Germany, and the dominant perspective suggesting “The Darkest Chapters Have Been Consigned to the Past”, particularly interesting. From this point of view, the history of Germany is told as a long and painful road from darkness to light, the story of a conflict between liberal democracy and “totalitarianisms”, a term whose generic use saw good fortune in recent years, thanks also to institutional support.

The focus then shifted to contemporary phenomena: the new authoritarian movements which are arising in Europe, the answer of Antifa groups, both in art or culture and violent confrontations, with two special lectures on Poland: the ones of Rafal Pankowski on The Populist Radical Right in Poland, and Pawel Machcewicz's difficult task in answering How Can a Democratic Civil Society Resist Authoritarianism?

The final and plenary discussion registered general satisfaction from the audience, but also some critical points. The relation between the economical situation and the rise of consensus towards authoritarianism has not been stressed enough, no lecture mentioned the neo-liberal society context and its possible relations with the rise of neofascist movements, or the hegemony of financial powers and the authoritarian attitudes by institutions or governments. In the opinion of part of the audience the economic layers inside the society, the class-struggle, should have been used as an interpretation tool, at least into a problematic perspective.

It was eventually noted, among the interesting and authoritative speakers, the absence of voices from Mediterranean Europe. In a conference about fascism and antifascism no speaker came from countries which were significant in the context of both, such as France, the former Yugoslavia, Greece, Spain or Italy. Maybe next time.

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