Debate

Fascism in East Central and Southeastern Europe: Mainstream Fascism or ‘Mutant’ Phenomenon?

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Fascism was a European-wide, and according to many authors, a global phenomenon. Given this transnational character, the comparative method is indispensable to fascism studies, as it enables scholars to identify similarities and differences between historical cases of fascism, and to account for the common or entangled dimensions of fascism at pan-European and global levels. Most recently, comparative studies have benefited from new methods of research, such as the history of transfers, shared or entangled history, and histoire croisée. These new approaches and angles of comparisons have provided students of fascism the opportunity to revisit their methods, units and levels of analysis, and to shift the focus of research from ideal types, variable-dependent methodology and causal reasoning to multiple levels of interaction among fascist movements and regimes.

These new trends of writing history from an integrated European or global perspective challenge students of fascism to firmly integrate non-Western fascist movements and regimes into unified research frameworks. The history of interwar fascism in East Central and Southeastern Europe should be placed at the very center of these endeavors, due to the complex and multifaceted nature of fascist movement and regimes in these regions, their strong political impact and their (geo)political entanglements with wider, contemporary European developments. Besides illuminating the relatively little known history of these movements and regimes, new comparative research on this topic might also provide novel insights into the nature of fascism as a generic phenomenon. In this context, the journal East Central Europe brings together prominent scholars of fascism, inviting them to engage in a critical evaluation of the state
of the field and of the new directions of research on fascism in these regions. The contributors have been asked to provide short opinion essays addressing the following set of questions which—I posit—are central to the scholarly effort of setting comparative research on fascism in East Central and Southeastern Europe on new theoretical and methodological foundations:

1. Comparative fascist studies have a long, yet protracted and non-linear history. To date, scholars of fascism have employed two main research strategies: fascism as a synchronic-epochal phenomenon, anchoring research to the study of interwar Europe; and fascism as a generic-diachronic phenomenon, detaching research from particular historical periods or case studies, but instead treating fascism as a global phenomenon of the modern age. Do you find these dominant approaches complementary or mutually exclusive? Moreover, are the available definitions of generic fascism useful for approaching the history of fascist movements and regimes in non-Western or non-European areas?

2. The expansion of research on fascism since the 1960s to new case studies and geographical areas has brought to the forefront the issue of the typological classification of “varieties of fascism.” In distinguishing these, some scholars have tended to focus on geographical regions or “topographical units,” thus moving from typologies to topologies of fascism. Arguing that regional differences are more salient than common features or other criteria of differentiations, they distinguished between “Western European fascism,” “East European fascism,” “Southern European fascism,” “Mediterranean fascism,” “Latin fascism” or “Third World fascism” in developing countries. Are historical regions heuristically useful units of analyzing fascism? How can they be most fruitfully used for historical research?

3. Fascist movements and regimes in East Central and Southeastern Europe have been often distinguished from their “Western” counterparts, and even exoticized as ‘mutant’ or ‘deviant’ forms of fascism. Are there distinct East Central or Southeastern European types of fascism? If so, what are their specific features?

4. How would you evaluate the state of the field of studies on fascism in East Central and Southeastern Europe? What are, in your view, the most

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1) For an ample historiographical contextualization of these questions and for further elaboration on their research implications, see my editorial introduction to this special issue.