Is there a Post-Soviet Fascism? A Brief Deliberation on the Cross-Cultural and Inter-Epochal Study of Right-Wing Extremism in the Post-Cold War Era

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In 1964, Hans Rogger published an article on pre-Soviet Russia asking “Was there a Russian fascism?” Rogger’s ultimate answer to this question was “no”—and rightly so. He classified the Union of the Russian People of 1905-1917, the largest of the so-called Black Hundreds, as non-fascist, or, at best, as “pre-fascist”. Rogger thereby seemed, in a way, to confirm Ernst Nolte’s famous 1963 thesis that fascism was a phenomenon linked to a certain historical epoch and civilization, namely to East Central, Southeastern, and Western Europe during the period of 1914-1945. Almost 50 years later, it is apt that East Central Europe poses questions similar to those that comparativists of fascism raised in the 1960s, and relates them now to the issue of a possibility of fascism in post-communist Europe and beyond.

1. Was Fascism a Synchronic-Epochal or a Generic-Diachronic Phenomenon?

While the synchronic, intra-civilizational study of European inter-war fascism still dominates the field, in recent decades, a diachronic and international approach based on some idea of generic fascism and represented by scholars such as Wolfgang Wippermann or Roger Griffin has gained prominence (Loh, Wippermann 2002; Griffin, Loh, Umland 2006). Both approaches complement, but also differ from, each other. The first one remains essentially

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idiographic insofar as it sees fascism as a temporally and locally circumscribed phenomenon—a uniquely European incidence in the fragile times between and during the two world wars. The second approach reveals a nomothetic worldview leading its followers to look for similarities in human societies across time and space. Although the latter mode of thinking runs the familiar risk of over-stretching its conceptual apparatus (Sartori 1970), it is the logically more sustainable approach to a scientific study of fascism. Once one decides to employ the term as an overarching category for analogical reasoning and not merely as a proper name to label a particular Italian ideology, movement or regime, fascism climbs the ladder of generalization. In fact, when applied exclusively to the interwar and World War II European contexts, fascism is already being used to interpret a relatively wide variety of phenomena. The Fasci, Nazis, Iron Guard, Falange, Arrow Cross, Ustashi, etc.—while having all emerged in interwar Europe—rose under rather different circumstances, and in countries with diverging cultural traditions as well as with dissimilar economic and social structures. Even if initially utilized exclusively within the comparative study of modern European history, the term thus automatically transforms into a sufficiently abstract notion that can be applied beyond the borders of Europe and limits of 1914-1945. The moment an interwar historian decides to classify as “fascist” some non-Italian European phenomena that are not mere imitations of Mussolini’s movement, the term loses its “innocence,” so to say, as a proper name.

An application of “fascism” to the post-war or/and non-European context can and often did, lead to the much lamented terminological “inflation” (e.g. Griffin 1993: 1). When, for instance, scholars like A. James Gregor (2006) or Alexander J. Motyl (2009, 2010) call the current regimes of China and Russia “fascist” or “fascistoid,” this is not a problem of the ideal type of fascism *per se*. Rather, it is the result of the peculiar definitions of fascism that Gregor and Motyl have formulated. The problem with such applications of “fascism” is not that the notion travels outside Europe or beyond 1945. Rather, the issue here is that “fascism” is conceptualized in a way that would lead to a general augmentation of “fascisms” in contemporary history, and thus to a loss of the heuristic, classificatory and communicative value of the term.

In the case of Gregor’s “developmental dictatorship” as a definition of fascism, many officially socialist authoritarian regimes of the post-war Second and Third Worlds would seem to qualify as “fascist”. To be sure, these regimes indeed had traits in common with the Italian interwar prototype. However, once the word “fascism” is used to generalize the existing commonalities between Mussolini’s and various later Second as well as Third World states, the question emerges of how to interpret and label equally manifest similarities