BRILL

FASCISM 4 (2015) 1-24

FASCISM
JOURNAL OF COMPARATIVE FASCIST STUDIES
brill.com/fasc

When Fascism Became Mainstream: The Challenge of Extremism in Times of Crisis

Second Lecture on Fascism – Amsterdam – April 9 2015

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Abstract

In the years between the two world wars a fledgling radical force that we today call 'fascism' was transformed from a tiny fringe movement into a dominant international political paradigm that challenged liberal 'mainstream' values and violently reversed decades of progressive change. Fascism's spectacular and devastating success underlined how limited, resented, and reversible the alleged liberal consensus was in large parts of Europe during the interwar years; and how much demand for radical ultranationalist and authoritarian alternatives lay just below the fragile veneer of the liberal-democratic mainstream. The worldwide economic crisis was a catalyst for, rather than the primary cause of, this transformation, revealing and legitimising strong pre-existing concerns and resentments, both among the elites and public opinion.

What is the relevance of this sombre historical precedent for contemporary Europe, haunted by perceptions of unprecedented existential, economic, and identity crises? How robust is the current mainstream consensus around liberal values and what kind of challenge does the continuing popularity of the radical populist right pose for 'mainstream' politics and society? More importantly, even if the new radical right still commands minority – though growing – support, are some of its extreme discourses becoming normalised and embedded into the mainstream?

Keywords

fascism – radical right – crisis – mainstream – radicalism – populism – Islamophobia – immigrants

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Two years ago, Nigel Copsey concluded his Lecture on Fascism – intriguingly titled *Fascism… but with an open mind* – with these words:

> Radical right-wing populism . . . has grown in sophistication largely due to the influence of neo-fascist theorists, particularly with regard to the adoption of ethno-pluralist discourse. . . . If we accept the particular contribution of neo-fascism to this process, it surely is a mistake to argue that neo-fascism has played a minimal role in defining the ideological and discursive practices of the contemporary far right. The fact that right-wing populists feel it necessary to repeatedly draw a clear line (in public) between themselves and the 'extreme right' also tells us much about the extent to which both the 'radical right' and 'extreme right' mingle. . . . Neo-fascism represents a continual evolution of fascism away from its dominant inter-war manifestations.[1]

Questioning or limiting the relevance of 'historic fascism' in the understanding of the 'new' radical right in contemporary Europe may have stemmed from a need to acknowledge the latter's changing ideological profile and, especially, political strategies; but driving a wedge between the two has often obscured the radical right's more subtle debts and links to the experience of interwar fascism.[2] Continuities and analogies are always difficult to reconcile with a historical approach that privileges the particular, the different, even the allegedly 'unique'. Yet, comparative and more recently transnational analyses of fascism have thrived precisely on this interstitial space where neither continuities nor discontinuities or ruptures are complete, where national responses can be both unique *and* fascinatingly analogous in a broader sense to those in other countries and historical contexts.[3] Used reflexively, such analogies may indeed

1 Nigel Copsey, '"Fascism… but with an open mind": Reflections on the Contemporary Far Right in (Western) Europe: First Lecture on Fascism – Amsterdam – 25 April 2013,' *Fascism: Journal of Comparative Fascist Studies* 2 (2013): 1–17, accessed March 5, 2015, doi:10.1163/22116257-00201008 (http://booksandjournals.brillonline.com/content/journals/10.1163/22116257-00201008).

2 Cas Mudde, *The Ideology of the Extreme Right* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 5–16; Roger Griffin, "'Interregnum" or "Endgame"? Radical Right Thought in the "Post-Fascist" Era,' *The Journal of Political Ideologies* 5 (2005): 163–178; Diethelm Prowe, '"Classic" Fascism and the New Radical Right in Western Europe: Comparisons and Contrasts,' *Contemporary European History* 3 (1994): 289–314.

3 For example, Andrea Mammone, Emmanuel Godin and Brian Jenkins, ed., *Mapping the Extreme Right in Contemporary Europe: From Local to Transnational* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012).

yield a sharper, more nuanced understanding of the contingent elements of historical process without fetishising either particularism or an a-historical sense of analogy.[4] The 2013 Lecture on Fascism ended with a plea, once again, to 'take [historic, pre-1945] fascism seriously', preserving its place of honour inside our analytical toolkit for the contemporary radical right.

I am here today to make a further case in favour of constructive historical analogy between 'historical fascism' and the contemporary radical right. In the years between the two world wars a fledgling radical force that we today call 'fascism' was transformed from a tiny fringe movement into a dominant international political paradigm that – we have been repeatedly told – challenged 'mainstream' values and violently reversed decades of progressive, 'liberal' change. Fascism's spectacular and devastating success underlined how limited, resented, and reversible the alleged liberal consensus was in large parts of Europe during the interwar years; and how much demand for radical ultranationalist and authoritarian alternatives lay just below the veneer of the liberal-democratic 'mainstream'. The 1929 worldwide economic crisis acted as a catalyst for, rather than the primary cause of, a radicalising spiral – revealing, intensifying, and legitimising strong pre-existing concerns and resentments, both among the elites and public opinion.

Does this sombre historical precedent hold any relevance for contemporary Europe, haunted by perceptions of unprecedented existential, economic, and identity crises? I believe it does – and explaining why and how is the task that I have set myself for this lecture. On many occasions in recent years, I have tried to draw attention to instructive, yet also disturbing analogies between the 1930s and the post-9/11-post-crisis world that we inhabit. In doing so, I have no intention of suggesting that contemporary Europe finds itself on the precipice of a catastrophic recurrence of 'fascism' in its historic guise.[5] My main focus is not radicalism or extremism or (neo-)fascism per se but instead the attitudes and responses of what we – very loosely – describe as 'mainstream' politics and society.

As one of the most eminent scholars of authoritarianism, Juan J. Linz, has noted, in the majority of cases the catastrophic disintegration of democracy in

4 Andreas W. Daum, Lloyd C. Gardner and Wilfried Mausbach, 'Introduction,' in *America, the Vietnam War and the World*, ed. Andreas W. Daum, Lloyd C. Gardner and Wilfried Mausbach (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 12.

5 Tim Stanley, 'European fascism has returned? It never went away and it probably never will,' *The Telegraph*, May 28, 2014, accessed March 5, 2015, http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/timstanley/100273640/european-fascism-has-returned-it-never-went-away-and-it-probably-never-will/.

interwar Europe and its replacement by post-liberal dictatorial regimes (with or without the participation of trademark 'fascists') had more to do with the weak commitment to the new system by elites and public opinions than with the strength of the radical anti-system challenge.[6] Long-standing, if rather concealed in its full intensity and reach, authoritarian, nativist demand, radicalised by perceptions of existential and material crises, intersected and aligned with a new radical form of populist, ultra-nationalist, palingenetic, and above all action-oriented supply. Fascism appealed to the intensifying disaffection of European societies with liberal democracy, provided tangible guarantees of defence against the perceived threat of domestic and international communism, promised unity and order, and inspired irrational loyalty in a wide range of elite and social groups with its fanatical, uncompromising promise of a radical 'new beginning.'[7] In different but complementary ways, generations of fascism scholars have pondered this disturbing development and provided a wealth of interpretations – some privileging the innovative and appealing 'supply' side of the fascist phenomenon while others dissecting the social, economic, political, and cultural structures of crisis that created strong 'demand' for such a radical force and ensured its transnational political 'success'.

Analysing 'historical fascism' as a genus of political extremism introduces a dichotomy between the kind of radical ideas and politics espoused by fascists, on the one hand, and the (putatively very different) attitudes and behaviours that formed part of the 'mainstream', on the other. The early premise of fascism as a historical 'parenthesis' – according to Benedetto Croce, a dissonant symptom of a serious moral and political 'malaise' which had its roots in the exceptional circumstances of the interwar period[8] – was comforting in the sense of driving a wedge between the perceived irrationality of fascism and the alleged orthodoxy of enlightenment reason embedded in European tradition. If the rise of interwar fascism could be analysed as an exceptional,

6 Juan J. Linz, *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); Juan J. Linz, 'Fascism and Non-DemocraticRregimes,' in *Totalitarianism and Political Religions, Vol. III: Concepts for the Comparison of Dictatorships: Theory and History of Interpretation*, ed. Hans Maier (New York: Routledge, 2003), 248.

7 David D. Roberts, *The Totalitarian Experiment in Twentieth-Century Europe: Understanding the Poverty of Great Politics* (New York, London: Routledge, 2005), 166–211; Roger Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning Under Mussolini and Hitler* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007), 179–183.

8 Benedetto Croce, *History as the Story of Liberty* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1941); Andrew Vincent, *Modern Political Ideologies* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010), 142–143.

pathological divergence from the path of progress and reason, as a rogue nihilist revolution rooted in the extraordinary circumstances of the post-First World War period that engaged in destruction without a shred of idealism, then both interwar fascism's success and the disintegration of liberalism could be seen as aberrant, discontinuous pathologies.[9]

Such a comforting perspective did not withstand more sombre and incisive postwar analyses. Horkheimer and Adorno revealed disturbing lacunae of irrationality and disorientation in the cherished Enlightenment project that re-inscribed fascism in the cultural circle of modernity.[10] George L. Mosse saw fascism not as a departure from mainstream European culture but as a 'scavenger' that 'absorbed most of what had (or proved to have) the greatest mass appeal in the past.'[11] For Mosse, as later for Zeev Sternhell and Roger Eatwell, fascism's appeal lay exactly in its ability to fuse highly disparate elements from both right and left, both revolutionary and authoritarian political traditions, into novel syncretic and convincing ideological hybrids.[12] According to Roger Griffin, fascism represented an intrinsically modern politicised attempt to overcome decadence, restore a new sense of certainty and existential stability as a way out from the crushing disorientation of the modern world, regenerate the national/racial community, and establish a fundamentally new order on the scorched debris of the old world that it sought to destroy.[13] Gilles Deleuze rejected the understanding of fascism as the product of pathological aberrations and seismic departures from an alleged rational path. Deleuze also argued that fascism's continuing recurrence was rooted in desires for security to fight anxiety, order to defend against chaos, meaning to compensate for disorientation.[14] In different ways, all these and other similar interpretations

9 For example: George Lukacs, *The Destruction of Reason* (London: Merlin Press, 1980); Hermann Rauschning, *Revolution of Nihilism: Warning to the West* (New York: Alliance Books, 1939); Franz Neumann, *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism, 1933–1944* (New York : Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1942).

10 Max Horkheimer, Teodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).

11 George L. Mosse, *Masses and Man: Nationalist and Fascist Perceptions of Reality* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1980), 183, 195.

12 Zeev Sternhell, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology: From Cultural Rebellion to Political Religion* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994); Roger Eatwell, 'The Nature of "Generic Fascism": The "Fascist Minimum" and the "Fascist Matrix",' in *Rechtsextreme Ideologien in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, ed. Uwe Backes (Cologne: Bohlau Verlag, 2003), 93–137.

13 See Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism*.

14 Brad Evans, 'Fascism and the Biopolitical,' in *Deleuze and Fascism*, ed. Brad Evans (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 42–63.

challenged the idea that fascism was an aberration of an otherwise orthodox mainstream path in European political and cultural history.

My task is to take further this process of de-escalating interwar fascism's 'departure' from the European 'mainstream'. My starting point is the observation that, when we juxtapose fascism as a rogue form of extremism to a putative moderation of mainstream elites and society, we are projecting a normative understanding of this 'mainstream' on a far messier and volatile historical reality. I contend that the 'success' of interwar fascism owed at least as much to cultural, political, and social pathologies that lay deep into the mainstream as to the cogency of its ideological synthesis and the effectiveness of its political praxis. I also revisit the conventional association between 'crisis' and the rise of fascism. Far more than the worldwide financial crisis of 1929, it was a more complex, subjective 'crisis mindset' (fed by a combination of economic, identity, and existential insecurities, both long- and short-term) that played a critical role in radicalising pathologies and deepening dark fissures already present in mainstream beliefs and attitudes. All these insights will allow me to make the case for a disturbing historical analogy with contemporary relevance – not one that concerns the continuities between interwar fascism and the contemporary radical right, as Nigel Copsey's 2013 lecture so eloquently did, but one that focuses on the continuity of disquieting mainstream inherent contradictions and 'crisis mindsets' that feed both the radical, taboo-breaking appeal of the contemporary European radical right and the potential for 'mainstream' radicalisation.

The Problem with the Mainstream

We need to talk about 'the mainstream'. It is disturbing that so little has been written about a concept that supposedly describes so many of us and gives extremism its relational meaning.[15] Mainstream, it would seem, simply exists. The term is deployed in everyday and academic discourse with a laxity that is uncharacteristic for our analytical, definition- and classification-obsessed modern mind. It is also in stark contrast to the precision with which we aim to talk about fascism. There may be seven or more varieties of the radical right, up

15 Even the remarkably influential study of Paul Hainsworth, *The Politics of the Extreme Right: From the Margins to the Mainstream* (London: Pinter, 2000) deals with the conceptual parameters of the 'mainstream' in a cursory way. Ditto for Humayun Ansari and Farid Hafez, ed., *From the Far Right to the Mainstream: Islamophobia in Party Politics and the Media* (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2012).

to six types of authoritarian regimes in interwar Europe, a host of different variants of fascism, depending on which survey one consults[16] – but there is, it would seem, one mainstream.

I do not intend to re-define the concept of 'mainstream' – although I do believe that it is high time we applied to it some of the conceptual attention and precision directed at concepts such as 'extremism', 'populism', and of course 'fascism'. Instead, I wish to draw attention to the ways in which the lazy, confused use of 'mainstream' in binary opposition to extremism (fascism included) may lead to troubling analytical distortions. This 'mainstream' is a strange, volatile assortment of mindsets, beliefs, and attitudes. Not unlike 'extremism', it involves a broad spectrums of attitudes that often cross over (and muddle) the supposed boundaries between the two. The two concepts exist in relational terms to each other; they are equally important in giving meaning to each other and in mapping the largely overlapping, hybrid political space that lies between them.[17] As a naming convention, extremism makes sense in spatial terms, as 'the farthest out' and removed from the midpoint of minimum workable consensus.[18] Naming and describing extremism bestows moral weight on the features of the mainstream; and stigma for the equivalent characteristics of extremism. It is through awareness of the notion of 'too far' – whether it is 'too little' or 'too much' – that the mainstream arrives at the consciousness of a midpoint of moderation and balance.

Still, between the middle and the 'farthest out' points, there is a fractal landscape of gradations, intersections, and partial overlaps. The story of the *Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands* [NPD; National Democratic Party of Germany] in Germany reveals how difficult it can be to detect where the mainstream ends and extremism begins. Since 2001 there have been two attempts to prove that the party is extremist because its ideology contravenes the constitution of the Federal Republic; the first failed while the second, four years on, is still under consideration.[19] Jobbik leaders and supporters in Hungary have strenuously denied that they are 'extremists' because they claim

16 Michael Mann, *Fascists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 44–48; Stanley G. Payne, *A History of Fascism, 1914–1945* (London: UCL Press, 1997), 468–469.

17 Michael Minkenberg, 'The New Right in France and Germany: Nouvelle Droite, Neue Rechte, and the New Right Radical Parties,' in *The Revival of Right Wing Extremism in the Nineties*, ed. Peter H. Merkl and Leonard Weinberg (London: Frank Cass, 1997), 84–85.

18 Uwe Backes, 'Meaning and Forms of Political Extremism,' *Central European Political Studies Review* 9 (2007): 242–262, accessed March 5, 2015, http://www.cepsr.com/clanek.php?ID=316.

19 David Art, *Inside the Radical Right: The Development of Anti-Immigrant Parties in Western Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 207–208.

that the party's popularity shows a wider shift in societal attitudes, redefining the very meaning of 'mainstream' in the process.[20] Back in the days of Jean-Marie Le Pen's leadership, the *Front National* in France fought a legal battle against the usage of the term 'extremist' to describe the party.[21] Only recently, Marine Le Pen tried (but failed) to secure a legal ban that prevented her opponents from attacking her party with the adjective 'fascist'.[22] For years, she has been presenting herself as the champion of a 'silent majority', claiming that she is merely saying loudly what many believed or thought privately but did not dare to express.[23]

The trope of the 'silent majority' has been a favourite of many a radical right-wing leader. In 2010, when the *Partij voor de Vrijheid* [PVV; Party for Freedom] made significant gains in the Dutch local elections, Geert Wilders declared at Almere: 'The leftist elite still believes in multiculturalism, coddling criminals, a European super-state and high taxes. But the rest of the Netherlands thinks differently. That silent majority now has a voice.'[24] This statement contained two disturbing allusions. The first was that, by virtue of its growing electoral support and agenda-setting power, the PVV had become far more reflective of mainstream beliefs than its political opponents were willing to concede. The second allusion, however, was even more unsettling – namely, that Dutch 'mainstream' society was (or, more accurately, had become) less liberal on a subset of issues relating to immigration, Islam, multiculturalism, European integration or human rights, diverging more and more emphatically from official mainstream discourse. No one of course holds a static view of either 'mainstream' or 'extremism'. Nigel Copsey's 2013 Lecture on Fascism illustrated the ways in which the radical right has changed over the past seventy years in comparison to the interwar period – and why this matters. The mainstream has changed too, accommodating new beliefs and rejecting

20 'Back to 1939: The Hungarian Right-Wing Press,' *Hungarian Spectrum*, July 12, 2009, accessed March 5, 2015, https://hungarianspectrum.wordpress.com/2009/07/12/back-to-1939-the-hungarian-rightwing-press/.

21 Uwe Backes, *Political Extremes: A Conceptual History from Antiquity to the Present* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 178.

22 'Front National's Le Pen can be called fascist, court rules,' *RFI English*, April 10, 2014, accessed March 5, 2015, http://www.english.rfi.fr/france/20140410-front-nationals-le-pen-can-be-called-fascist-court-rules.

23 Aurelien Mondon, *The Mainstreaming of the Extreme Right in France and Australia: A Populist Hegemony?* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 134.

24 Ian Traynor, 'Geert Wilders's party wins seat in Dutch elections – early results,' *The Guardian*, March 4, 2010, accessed March 5, 2015, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/mar/04/geert-wilders-dutch-elections-results.

previous ideas. But Wilders's 2010 statement quoted above suggested that the professed mainstream values of the contemporary European elites are often shown to be grotesquely at odds with attitudes entertained, openly or privately, by wide sections of mainstream society – even majorities.

If anything, the historical record of the interwar period contains a sombre warning as to how volatile, uneven, and above all potentially reversible 'progress' can be. When peace finally prevailed in Europe after the tumultuous four years of the First World War, a new era of liberal institutions and rights seemed to have dawned on the troubled continent. The highly symbolic transformation of Germany from a bastion of authoritarian militarism into a popular republic was accompanied by the introduction of liberal constitutions and the establishment of democratic parliamentary systems in many European countries. The 'first wave' of liberalisation and democratisation that had begun in the second half of the nineteenth century swept across war-ravaged Europe, bringing profound institutional changes that strengthened popular sovereignty and minority protection.[25] In hindsight, however, such a momentous change was a brief interlude rather than a lasting change of political direction. Liberal constitutions were widely regarded with hostility and resentment as an 'alien' forced import – 'a standard-issue English suit foisted' on the vanquished and the weak, as Carl Schmitt noted.[26] In Romania, the new constitution combined plural citizenship with a host of measures amounting to full emancipation of the country's Jewish community.[27] However, legal achievements did not translate into changes in societal attitudes towards the country's minorities – and especially the Jews. Anti-Jewish agitation escalated throughout 1922–23, fuelled by the prospect of full Jewish emancipation.[28] Already in the early 1920s, the advance of democratisation and liberal rights had started to become reversed – after Hungary in 1919, Italy and Spain followed soon along the path of authoritarian 'departure'. The traumatic ebb of this reversal was reached in the late 1930s, when all but the most established and robust democracies in the north and west of Europe had disintegrated into authoritarian, anti-liberal, and nationalist dictatorships with very little respect for civil

25 Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).

26 Stephen Holmes, *The Anatomy of Anti-Liberalism* (New Haven CA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 37–38.

27 Constantin Iordachi, 'The Unyielding Boundaries of Citizenship: The Emancipation of "Non-Citizens" in Romania, 1866–1918,' *European Review of History* 8 (2001): 157–186.

28 Irina Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania: Regionalism, Nation-Building and Ethnic Struggle, 1918–1930* (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 170.

and minority rights, and even less concern for the welfare of their Jewish communities.[29]

Fascism was an integral part of this – much wider and multifaceted – international authoritarian and post-liberal turn of the 1920s and especially 1930s.[30] The period between the appointment of Benito Mussolini as Italian prime minister in October 1922 and the establishment of the Fascist dictatorship in January 1925 marked the first milestone in this shift and expanded the horizon of opportunity for radical political change elsewhere. With the advent of Adolf Hitler to power in January 1933, the international dynamic of the departure intensified. In fact, the 1933–36 period was the most critical for the reshaping of the 'anti-democratic space' in interwar Europe, in the sense that the successful consolidation of the Nazi regime appears to offer a resounding confirmation both of the paradigmatic 'authoritarian turn' and of an alternative radical political model that many at the time recognised in both Italian Fascism and German National Socialism. More importantly, however, the radical praxis of the National Socialist regime unlocked opportunities for similar forms of action elsewhere. The defiant, terrifying breaking of taboos in Nazi Germany soon prompted others to do the same – or more. The model pioneered by the Nazi regime with the 1935 so-called Nuremberg Laws not only reversed violently decades of liberal emancipatory achievements but also appealed to, and activated, preexisting, yet latent or partly suppressed, anti-Jewish resentments in other countries. It set a new – radical yet legitimised in the eyes of many willing sympathisers – precedent that facilitated its adoption, adaptation, and reproduction – in a cascade effect – in large parts of the continent.[31]

Beyond anti-Semitism, fascism supplied novel radical 'solutions' to 'problems' that many others – not just in Italy or Germany, and not just 'fascists' – were already keen to address in far more radical, taboo-breaking ways. Anti-liberal, anti-democratic/parliamentary, anti-socialist/communist, anti-minority, militaristic, and ultranationalist/nativist attitudes were strong

29 Mann, *Fascists*, 24–29; Aristotle Kallis, *Genocide and Fascism: The Eliminationist Drive in Fascist Europe* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 211–260; Aristotle Kallis, 'The "Fascist-Effect": On the Dynamics of Political Hybridisation in Interwar Europe,' in *Rethinking Fascism and Dictatorship*, ed. Antonio Costa Pinto and Aristotle Kallis (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014), 13–40.

30 David D. Roberts, 'Fascism and the Framework for Interactive Political Innovation during the Era of the Two World Wars,' in *Rethinking Fascism and Dictatorship*, ed. Antonio Costa Pinto and Aristotle Kallis (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014), 42–66; Roberts, *Totalitarian Experiment*, chapters 1, 9.

31 Kallis, *Genocide and Fascism*, 216–227.

among mainstream elites and societies – barely reformed by the brief post-First World War interlude of democratisation. By the 1930s, what we nowadays describe as 'fascism' had come to be regarded by many as a viable and successful 'third way' alternative to the established ideologies of conservatism and liberalism, as well as to the challenge of international socialism. Some with deeply traditional and conservative beliefs, such as the Spanish general Miguel Primo de Rivera who headed a dictatorship in Spain in 1923–30, saw in Mussolini's regime a novel political and constitutional arrangement that guaranteed order – freed from the limits of political liberalism, effective in crushing the left, and controlled tightly by a single figurehead from above.[32] Others – including prominent western conservative politicians such as Winston Churchill and the British Foreign Secretary Austen Chamberlain,[33] as well as businessmen on both sides of the Atlantic[34] – admired Mussolini's resolute approach to domestic order (and particularly his crackdown on the organised left) as a political recipe suited to Italian conditions, even if they viewed fascism as unsuited to the very different historical trajectory of countries in the north and west of Europe. Although notably more radical and threatening, Hitler too had his own circle of mainstream sympathisers in democratic countries of western Europe. Lord Londonderry's remark that 'what takes us weeks or months to do in parliament, Germany can do by a stroke of the pen' was emblematic of a much wider and more profound disaffection among mainstream conservatives with liberal-parliamentary democracy.[35]

'Crisis' and Radical Potential

The rise and international 'success' of interwar fascism unfolded against a backdrop of profound and multifaceted crisis. 'Crisis' is a fraught and over-extended term. As Reinhart Koselleck has noted, 'from the nineteenth century on, there has been an enormous quantitative expansion in the variety of meanings attached to the concept of crisis, but few corresponding gains in

32 J. Tusell and Ismael Saz, 'Mussolini y Primo de Rivera: Las relaciones políticas y diplomáti cas de dos dictaduras mediterráneas,' *Boletín de la Real Academia de la Historia* 179 (1992): 482–483.

33 Peter Neville, *Hitler and Appeasement: The British Attempt to Prevent the Second World War* (London: Continuum, 2006), 50.

34 Robert A. Rosenbaum, *Waking to Danger: Americans and Nazi Germany, 1933–1941* (Santa Barbara CA: ABC Clio, 2010), 50–58.

35 Ian Kershaw, *Making Friends with Hitler: Lord Londonderry and Britain's Road to War* (London: Penguin, 2012), 265.

either clarity or precision.'[36] Almost immediately after the establishment of Mussolini's dictatorship in Italy, contemporary Marxist observers connected the rise of fascism – as an international force – as the product of a crisis that was intrinsic to the capitalist order.[37] By contrast, in his book *The German Catastrophe*, the conservative German historian Friedrich Meinecke argued that Hitler's regime was like an 'alien force' taking hold of Germany in 1933–45, a kind of 'malaise' that afflicted German society. Nazism, he argued, may have had its intellectual and cultural roots in German national history but its political appearance and victory in the 1930s was the unlikely product of a series of unfortunate historical accidents – and crises.[38] Even Palmiro Togliatti, the prominent Italian socialist leader, explained the diffusion of fascism in the interwar years as a poisonous infection incubated in an atmosphere of crisis, 'flow[ing] among peasants, workers and especially the petty bourgeoisie and the intellectuals. In other words, it spread among people.'[39] During his postwar trial, the German philosopher Martin Heidegger accepted responsibility for his judgement to support Hitler's regime and claimed that the 'malaise' that fed the fascist episode lay much deeper, in a profound crisis of the whole cultural traditions of the European west.[40]

Postwar historiography too has made ample use of the analytical toolkit of 'crisis' in explaining the rise and success of fascism. Richard Overy described the entire period between the end of the First World War and the outbreak of the second global conflict as one marked by multiple, mutually reinforcing crises.[41] In Italy, the 'crisis of the dopoguerra' has featured prominently in

36 Reinhart Koselleck, 'Crisis,' *Journal of the History of Ideas* 67, no. 6 (2006): 397.

37 David Beetham, *Marxists in Face of Fascism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983); Renzo De Felice, *Interpretations of Fascism* (Cambridge MA, London: Harvard University Press, 1977), 30–53.

38 Friedrich Meinecke, *The German Catastrophe: Reflections and Recollections* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950); Andreas Agocs, 'Divisive Unity: The Politics of Cultural Nationalism during the First German Writers' Congress of October 1947,' in *Becoming East German: Socialist Structures and Sensibilities after Hitler*, ed. Mary Fulbrook and Andrew I. Port (New York: Berghahn, 2013), 65.

39 Luca La Rovere, 'The "Examination of Conscience" of the Nation: The Lost Debate about the "Collective Guilt" in Italy, 1943–5,' in *Perpetrators, Accomplices and Victims in Twentieth-Century Politics: Reckoning with the Past*, ed. Anatoly M Khazanov and Stanley Payne (Abingdon, New York: Routledge, 2013), 34.

40 Mark W. Clark, *Beyond Catastrophe: German Intellectuals and Cultural Renewal After World War II, 1945–55* (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2006), 2–3.

41 Richard J. Overy, *The Interwar Crisis*, 2nd edition (Abingdon, New York: Routledge, 2014), 95–100.

interpretations of the rise of Italian Fascism.[42] In Germany, the debilitating effects of the worldwide depression have been used as causal explanatory factors of the spectacular rise of the electoral power of the NSDAP between the low of 1928 and the peak of 1932.[43] Robert Boyce has spoken of a 'dual crisis' of political institutions and the global capitalist order as a mutually reinforcing spiral: the political failure of international cooperation exacerbated the economic downturn that started at the end of the 1920s and the subsequent depression reinforced the protectionism and nationalism that further undermined the liberalised economic system.[44] As I have already mentioned, Linz described the spectacular collapse of democracy in interwar Europe as the outcome of a profound institutional crisis that deprived the liberal-democratic systems of their much-needed legitimacy in the eyes of elites and public opinions alike.[45]

It is always easier in retrospect to see crisis as an objective, structural force of historical change. Beyond, however, the tangible features of economic crisis (unemployment, decline in consumption, price rises and currency devaluation, breakdown in global cooperation leading to protectionism and economic conflict, escalation of class conflict etc), there are a host of other, less concrete and measurable – and thus highly subjective – indicators that can be inscribed on a discourse of crisis. To put it simply, there is structural crisis (in or of a system) and there is a 'crisis mindset', based more on subjective perception and 'interpreted social reality' than on objective awareness of reality itself.[46] The two facets may significantly overlap, they may even be causally linked, but they operate very differently. A 'crisis mindset' may be rooted in objective observations about socio-economic or cultural change but it may also acquire a separate dynamic that far exceeds – or even diverges from – the reality of structural crisis.

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42 For example: Giovanni Sabbatici, *La Crisi Italiana del Primo Dopoguerra: La Storia e la Critica* (Bari, Rome: Laterza, 1976); Franco Catalano, *Potere Economico e Fascismo: La Crisi del Dopoguerra* (Milan: Lerici. 1964); Roberto Vivarelli, *Storia delle Origini del Fascismo: L'Italia dalla Grande Guerra alla Marcia su Roma* (Bologna: Mulino, 1991).

43 Mary Fulbrook, *A History of Germany, 1918–2008: The Divided Nation*, 4th edition (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 40–52.

44 Robert Boyce, *The Great Interwar Crisis and the Collapse of Globalisation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009).

45 Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-Communist Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

46 David Schoenbaum, *Hitler's Social Revolution* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1966), 325–329.

The pervasive 'crisis mindset' that seized European elites and publics in the interwar period was fed by diverse sources. The experience of, first, hyperinflation and, later, global depression, with its severe social implications, was but one of them. The ensuing intensification of antagonism between states, national groups, and social classes; the sense of national humiliation for those countries that had ended up on the losing side of the First World War and a feeling of betrayal among some of the victors; the fear about a worldwide communist take-over in the wake of the 1917 Bolshevik revolution in Russia (and its spin-offs in Hungary and Germany that may have failed in practice but at the time seemed to confirm the pervasive anti-communist hysteria); the psychological gap left by the brutal experience and devastation of the First World War; the painful breakdown of international cooperation after the optimism that surrounded the creation of the League of Nations; a growing sense of cultural despair about the future of 'western' culture[47] and of Europe as the powerhouse of the world; the shattering of the optimistic expectations that followed the conclusion of the Great War and shook even further the belief in human progress[48] – all contributed to a pervasive and ever-deepening anxiety about the future that both predated and outlasted the 1929 global economic crisis. Many of the tributaries of what Roger Griffin has described as a collective 'sense-making crisis'[49] had been for some time flowing faster and faster just beneath the surface of grudging democratisation and liberal advances. The worldwide economic crisis supplied just enough more force – existential Angst mixed with material and status insecurity – to combine these tributaries into a sweeping cataclysmic stream. Crisis – or rather a pervasive, acute perception thereof – confronted European societies with a historic moment of judgement, forcing them to choose from a severely restricted menu of harsh binary options and 'unavoidable, harsh, non-negotiable alternatives.'[50]

Nevertheless, even before the onset of the economic crisis, many among the mainstream elites had expressed preferences or even made choices that ran against the grain of the fledgling liberal, democratic, and parliamentary orthodoxies. Liberals and above all conservatives in both Italy and Germany had been working behind the limelight to crush the left and defend the status quo from revolution or chaos at any cost, even if this meant an increasing flirtation

47 Fritz R. Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair* (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1961).

48 Overy, *The Interwar Crisis*, 98–99.

49 Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (London, New York: Routledge, 1993), 193; Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism*, 48, 91.

50 Koselleck, 'Crisis,' 358, 399.

with forces of the radical right to the detriment of the liberal order. It was conservatives, not radicals or fascists, in Hungary that broke the taboo of anti-Jewish legislation in the post-Versailles Europe (the 1920 numerous clausus law).[51] It was a progressive liberal government in Greece that tolerated and even indirectly supported violence against the Jews of Salonica in the early 1930s; in the 1930s, once power ebbed away from the liberal party, its leadership was willing to support coups and entertain authoritarian solutions.[52] It was a coalition of conservative nationalists in Poland who consistently promoted policies of aggressive 'Polonisation' of national economy at the expense of all minorities; on the eve of the Nazi invasion in 1939, some of them petitioned the parliament to introduce racial legislation against the country's sizeable Jewish community.[53] Conservative forces in Austria, Portugal, and Spain were willing to subvert liberal institutions in order to protect their status against the agitation of the left. Overall, democracy imploded in the 1930s not so much because fascists and their radical fellow travellers across the continent waged such a formidable challenge to its institutions but because it never possessed sufficient supplies of legitimacy among the public and the elites that were supposed to defend it.

The catalogue of these and other cross-overs is long and disquieting. In different ways, both fascist and conservative/liberal political constituencies had effectively blurred the boundaries that allegedly separated radicalism from the mainstream, the 'old' from the 'new' right. Fascists proved particularly adept at elbowing their way into the mainstream by shedding some of their earlier radical views in an attempt to endear themselves with industrial and political elites.[54] Mosse highlighted how successfully interwar fascism reconciled its two seemingly antithetical rhythms, the 'amoeba-like absorption of ideas from the mainstream of popular thought and culture, countered by the urge towards activism and its taming.' He also noted that 'fascism positioned itself much more in the mainstream than socialism . . . [for] it accepted the

51 Mária M. Kovács, *Liberal Professions and Illiberal Politics: Hungary From the Habsburgs to the Holocaust* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 49.

52 Steven Bowman, *The Agony of Greek Jews, 1940–45* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 30–31, 206; Vassilios Bogiatzis, *Ambivalent Modernism: Technology, Ideology of Science and Politics in Interwar Greece (1922–1940)* [in greek] (Athens: Eurasia, 2012), 195–272.

53 Kallis, *Genocide and Fascism*, 125–127.

54 Martin A. Lee, *The Beast Reawakens: Fascism's Resurgence from Hitler's Spymasters to Today's Neo-Nazi Groups and Right-Wing Extremisms* (Abingdon, New York: Routledge, 2000), 389.

common man's preferences and went on to direct them to its own ends.'[55] On their part, interwar political elites were less entrenched in ideological 'red lines' against some extremist alternatives than often assumed. Their commitment to liberalism and democracy was brittle to begin with, if not grudging and tactical in many cases. Faced with formidable challenges to their power from both the revolutionary left and the radical right, they often prioritised order and maintenance of their status over defence of the liberal-parliamentary order. Even when mainstream elites turned decisively against fascist organisations, they often did so in parallel with a strategy of ruthlessly dismantling the liberal-parliamentary order.[56] As fascism gained in strength and political legitimacy, they learnt from its radical praxis, adapting selectively some of its institutional experiments, political strategies, and stylistic elements. It was this ongoing convergence between extremism and the mainstream that, by the 1930s, had rendered a number of earlier taboos (dictatorship and dismantling of the liberal-parliamentary system, persecution of political opponents, discrimination against minorities, anti-Semitism, totalitarian models of social control, militarism, etc) far more acceptable to mainstream political elites.[57] All in all, the radical 'fascist' synthesis was forged with individual components mined from within the mainstream of European culture and politics. The severity of the 1929 global depression and its aftermath certainly contributed to the violent intensity and timing of the backlash; but the financial 'crisis' – and even more the subjective 'crisis mindset' that it fostered – magnified, radicalised, and legitimised much of what was already in place.

Crisis, the New Radical Right, and the Mainstream

What is the relevance of this somber historical precedent for contemporary Europe, haunted by perceptions of unprecedented existential, economic, and identity crises? Since the turn of the new millennium, the new radical right has thrived in a milieu of heightened insecurity and existential anxiety amidst a pervasive perception that old certainties once again crumble, exposing a terrifying dark horizon for the future. The terrorist attacks on New York's Twin

55 Mosse, *Masses and Man*, 183.

56 Aristotle Kallis, 'The "Regime Model" of Fascism: A Typology,' *European History Quarterly* 30 (2000): 77–104.

57 Aristotle Kallis and Antonio Costa Pinto, 'Conclusions,' in *Rethinking Fascism and Dictatorship*, ed. Antonio Costa Pinto and Aristotle Kallis (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014), 272–282.

Towers on 11 September 2001 provided a powerful unifying theme of existential (in)security, around which parties of the radical right could weave and articulate more effectively their other radical critiques of the political system. The subsequent Al-Qaeda terrorist attacks in Madrid (2004) and London (2005), as well as the recent spasm of violence in Paris, Copenhagen, and the territories of the Islamic State, only strengthened these fears among the European public and increased the mainstream appeal of the anti-Islam discourse of the parties of the radical right. Selective, sensationalist coverage of terrorist incidents by mainstream media has heightened a public perception of insecurity and has drawn attention to the issue of defending national security as a matter of utmost priority regardless of any associated transgressions in the domain of human rights and freedoms. In these circumstances, the radical right's attack on Islam as both a religion and set of associated cultural values was presented as a legitimate form of collective (national and 'civilisational') self-defence.[58] The spectre of radicalisation of Muslims living in Europe also lent ammunition to the radical right's ethno-pluralist arguments, leading to stronger accusations that communities with Muslim background were either unable or unwilling to 'integrate' into an alleged national or 'European' way of life.

The divisive message of the radical right has also benefited significantly from the recent global financial crisis with its debilitating economic and social side-effects. The crash infused pre-existing anxieties about material resources (employment, wages, welfare, public services) with a new sense of urgency that played into the hands of the radical right's 'zero sum' argument that pitted nativist communities against immigrants in a fierce competition where one's gain is the other's equivalent loss. It is thus not surprising that immigration became the symbolic centre of gravity for the radical right, absorbing all its trademarks concerns about security, identity, and wellbeing. The timing could not have been more felicitous for the radical right, with mainstream policies of deep, prolonged austerity implemented since 2008 and seemingly uncontrollable migration flows hardening popular attitudes in relation to the so-called 'absorption capacity' of the host societies and the spectre of economic competition between 'native' and 'immigrant' groups.

Meanwhile, the view of immigrants or Muslims as threats to the existential, identity, and material security of western societies and 'the west' as a whole

58 Ariane Chebel D'Appolonia and Simon Reich, 'The Securitization of Immigration: Multiple Countries, Multiple Dimensions,' in *Immigration, Integration and Security: America and Europe in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Ariane Chebel D'Appolonia and Simon Reich (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008), 1–22.

has shifted away from the fringes to the mainstream of the political debate. The ethno-pluralist mantra of putative cultural and moral incompatibility between certain immigrant communities and 'the west' has long ago ceased to be the preserve of right-wing extremists and radicals; yet the degree to which it has now been accepted in mainstream perception, as evidenced by a series of opinion polls,[59] is unprecedented. Language that contains strong residues of unreformed racism is customarily used by mainstream politicians, media, and members of the public when they talk about the alleged threat posed by particular, perceived as 'non-native', groups, be those Roma, Muslims, black people or members of any targeted ethnic group.[60] Meanwhile, pseudo-rational arguments about 'absorption capacity' and intensifying competition for dwindling material resources have been given a powerful psychological boost by the 'crisis mindset' that the 2008 worldwide economic crisis fostered among the public.[61] Framing Muslims and/or immigrants as an existential threat not just to the abstract 'western culture' but also to western 'way of life' and 'liberal values' has paid handsome dividends for the radical right.[62] The gains in the electoral domain are significant and broadly sustained, if short of a cascade effect. But it is on the basis of agenda-setting power that the anti-immigrant, anti-Islam, and anti-minority discourses of the radical right have scored their most significant and enduring successes.[63]

The rise of the radical right, both as an electoral constituency and even more so as an agenda-setting force, is – to use a phrase coined by Cas Mudde – a phenomenon of 'pathological normalcy', that is, the product of a radicalisation of beliefs and values that have always formed part of, or have recently become more acceptable to, mainstream society.[64] This is an invaluable, lucid corrective to the comforting discourses that continue to pretend that the

59 Jocelyne Cesari, *Why the West Fears Islam: An Exploration of Muslims in Liberal Democracies* (New York: Palgrave, 2013), 15–16.

60 Harald Bauder, *Immigration Dialectic: Imagining Community, Economy, and Nation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011); Cesari, *Why the West Fears Islam*, 6.

61 Peter Scholten, *Framing Immigrant Integration: Dutch Research Policy Dialogues in Comparative Perspective* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011), 177–178.

62 Matthew J. Goodwin, *New British Fascism: Rise of the British National Party* (Abingdon, New York: Routledge, 2011), 178.

63 Michelle Hale Williams, *The Impact of Radical Right-Wing Parties in West European Democracies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006), 44–46.

64 Cas Mudde, 'The populist radical Right: A pathological normalcy,' *Eurozine*, August 31, 2010, accessed March 5, 2015, http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2010-08-31-mudde-en.html; Hans-Georg Betz, 'The Growing Threat of the Radical Right,' in *Right-wing Extremism in the Twenty-first Century*, ed. Peter H. Merkl and Leonard Weinberg (London: Frank Cass, 2003), 84.

extremists inhabit a strange, alien landscape well beyond the horizon of mainstream society. However, radicalisation may both breed further radicalisation and normalise, de-stigmatise it. The successful framing of a series of independent arguments that tap on pre-existing prejudices, old and new fears, as well as profound existential anxieties into a lucid master-narrative, easily flows back into the mainstream. It confirms biases and legitimises latent extreme tendencies. For want of a more eloquent word, it 'mainstreams' previously deemed as 'extreme' ideas, discourses, attitudes and behaviours. If much of what the radical right currently offers is largely derived from a dark chamber of fear, anxiety, and resentment just below the shining surface of mainstream moderation, then it feeds back into it, widening the cracks and adding more force to the explosive fusions. That all this happens as a strikingly unspectacular, gradual, often trivial and difficult to gauge process makes the result of 'mainstreaming' even more difficult to contest while it is underway. Suddenly, strange white vans with the menacing slogan 'Go Home or Face Arrest' are seen roaming the streets, financed not by the radical right but by a 'mainstream' government; politicians who complain about 'foreign voices' filling up the streets top the polls; and talks by 'mainstream' politicians of 'deporting foreign criminals' no longer disturb the bulk of the public opinion or the leaders of other 'mainstream' parties.[65]

Nowadays we are well aware that the damage inflicted by fascists and kindred radicals in interwar Europe was disproportionately higher than the actual electoral strength of their parties or movements. We should thus take no comfort from the fact that, in spite of its rising popularity, the electoral support for the radical right remains a minority phenomenon. Very few people could have predicted the immense symbolic significance of the incident that took place in Wangen, Solothurn, Switzerland in 2005. A local Turkish cultural association, which two years earlier had been granted permission to use an industrial building as a cultural and religious space, applied to the authorities for the construction of a single 'symbolic' minaret, merely six metres high. After two rejections from the planning authorities and appeals by a small number of local residents, permission was granted on condition that the minarets would not be used for call to prayer. The *Schweizerische Volkspartei* [SVP; Swiss People's Party] – originally a national conservative party that underwent significant transformation in a radical-populist direction in the 1990s and emerged as a major party in the following decade – took up the issue, first at canton level

65 Dan Hodges, '2014: The Year Racism Went Mainstream,' *The Telegraph*, December 5, 2014, accessed March 5, 2015, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/immigration/11275507/2014-the-year-racism-went-mainstream.html.

(unsuccessfully) and in 2007 as a matter of federal constitutional amendment. The requisite number of signatures for a referendum (one hundred thousand) was reached over a long period (April 2007–September 2008) and the referendum was approved by the federal courts as constitutional. All 'mainstream' parties and the majority of religious organisations urged voters to reject the proposal. The courts, while declaring the referendum constitutional, issued a stark warning that approval of the measure would risk running foul of international human rights principles, undermine inter-community relations, and damage Switzerland's image.[66] Opinion polls indicated that public support for the initiative started from a low point and rose in the months before the referendum but remained below forty per cent. On the day of the referendum, however, 57.5% of voters endorsed the measure, with the strongest support in rural cantons where the number of Muslims and immigrants in general was low.

Which factors account for this surprising success of the campaign for the minaret ban? Clearly, the issue had become a symbolic vent for deeper and long-standing public concerns about immigration, Islam, Swiss identity, and national security. Importantly too, these concerns had been nurtured by heightened insecurities caused by international terrorism, the perception of rapidly increasing migration flows, and the uncertainties caused by the worldwide economic crisis. The timing was also crucial: with the rise of support for the SVP in the 2003 and 2007 elections, immigration and Islam were high on the political and media agendas; they resonated with the public and were the subject of 'open' policy debates.[67] Finally, propaganda played a crucial role – the now infamous SVP poster showing a woman in burqa against the backdrop of a Swiss flag pierced by huge minarets in the shape of missiles linked to a number of sensitive contemporary issues (security, Islamic fundamentalism, terrorism, women's rights, national sovereignty) that framed the intended outcome in more acceptable ways to a democratic, liberal electorate. A follow-up referendum demanding the immediate expulsion of immigrants convicted of certain criminal acts, was won in 2010 – though more narrowly –, built on these themes and capitalised on the precedent of the earlier referendum vote, pushing mainstream debate even further into a territory previously considered

66 Lorenz Langer, 'Panacea or Pathetic Fallacy? The Swiss Ban on Minarets,' *Vanderbilt Journal of Transitional Law* 43 (2010): 863–951.

67 Joel Busher and Graham Macklin, 'Interpreting "Cumulative Extremism": Six Proposals for Enhancing Conceptual Clarity,' *Terrorism and Political Violence*, published online June 12, 2014, accessed March 5, 2015, http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09546553.2013.870556.

as belonging to the sphere of stigmatised extremism.[68] After its referendum victories, and with electoral support well above twenty-five per cent in the last fifteen years, one could argue that in many respects the SVP has more of a claim to being a mainstream party in Switzerland. The key political battlegrounds of immigration, identity, and security that the party had sought to force on the mainstream political debate were by then accepted.

Where a few go, more follow with fewer inhibitions. Once a taboo is broken, it loses its original stigma and liberates demand for similar or more radical measures elsewhere. High-profile mainstream politicians reacted to the widespread condemnation of the Swiss ban on minaret construction by arguing that the underlying fears that led to this outcome must be respected and taken on board by politicians. A series of opinion polls conducted in many European countries shortly after the outcome of the Swiss referendum revealed either majorities or very strong minorities in favour of similar restrictive measures against Muslim places of worship, including outright bans on the construction of further mosques.[69] Back in 2006, Geert Wilders had forced the Dutch coalition government to consider banning the burqa in public places. Although the measure did not reach the legislature at the time, it resurfaced in 2008 and again in 2012, again reflecting the growing agenda-setting power of Wilders's PVV but now also benefiting from the precedent of the similar Belgian and French bans in 2011.[70] Operating in a public discourse largely shaped according to the strategies of the radical right, and witnessing the degree of popular support for this new agenda, mainstream parties across Europe have 'felt compelled or freed, depending on one's point of view, to take much tougher stands' vis-a-vis Islam, immigration, and security.[71]

68 'Switzerland Tackles Immigration – Yet Again,' *Deutsche Welle*, November 11, 2014, accessed March 5, 2015, http://www.dw.de/switzerland-tackles-immigration-yet-again/a-18090497.

69 Aristotle Kallis, 'Breaking the Taboos and "Mainstreaming" the Extreme: The Debates on Restricting Islamic Symbols in Europe,' in *Right-Wing Populism in Europe: Politics and Discourse*, ed. Ruth Wodak, Majid Khosravinik and Brigitte Mral (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 55–70; Stefano Allievi, *Conflicts over Mosques in Europe: Policy Issues and Trends – NEF Initiative on Religion and Democracy in Europe* (London: Alliance, 2009). Accessed March 5, 2015, http://www.nef-europe.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Conflicts-over-mosques_NEF-RelDem-RELIGION-MOSQUES-Final-1.pdf.

70 Michael Minkenberg, 'Anti-Immigrant Politics in Europe: The Radical Right, Xenophobic Tendencies, and Their Political Environment,' in *Bringing Outsiders in: Transatlantic Perspectives on Immigrant Political Incorporation*, ed. Jennifer L Hochschild and John H. Mollenkopf (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), 150.

71 Jeffrey M. Togman, *The Ramparts of Nations: Institutions and Immigration Policies in France and the United States* (Westport CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2012), 132.

Back to the Future... in a Way

How robust is the current mainstream consensus around liberal values and what kind of challenge does the continuing popularity of the radical populist right pose for 'mainstream' politics and society? The most spectacular recent successes of the radical right in Europe have come from parties and movements (like the National Front under the leadership of Marine Le Pen in France, the UKIP in Britain, the Swedish Democrats, the Norwegian Progress Party, and the Dutch PVV) that have effectively blurred the distinction between 'mainstream' and 'extremism'. In so doing, they have largely succeeded in de-stigmatising themselves in the eyes of large sections of public opinion, targeting with their political message a small number of key populist concerns, legitimising more radical ways of speaking and thinking about the future, and thus exposing further the difficulties that 'mainstream', 'elite' parties have had in adapting to the changing political landscape. Growing voter disaffection with established parties and with the overall operation of the political system has both strengthened the appeal of right-wing populists and become far more pronounced as a result of it. At the same time, a pervasive sense of crisis – both objective and perceived, with material, existential, and identity extensions that feed a cumulative crisis mindset – has revealed a substratum of (more) extreme attitudes buried just under the surface of mainstream moderation and alleged progress.

Since the magnitude of the 2008 worldwide economic crisis became apparent, more and more voices have attempted to draw parallels with the 1930s. Crisis, and the debilitating perception thereof, has enhanced old insecurities and added new explosives fears to the volatile mix. In this milieu of perceived extraordinary challenges and disintegration of certainties, radical parties have thrived in the polls and as agenda-setters. The successful 'mainstreaming' of radical anti-immigration, anti-Islam/Muslim or anti-Roma agendas – to mention only the most prominent – has been the product of a vicious circle: radical parties have been mining pre-existing fears lurching beneath the surface of mainstream moderation, re-framing them into more acceptable and resonant policy platforms, gaining votes and respectability in the process; at the same time, mainstream politicians have responded to the rise of the radical right by actively normalising some of its most extreme discourses and ideas. Accepting the challenge to compete on the same political terrain and against the same benchmarks that have been defined by the discourses of the radical right (immigration quotas, absorption capacity, national sovereignty, cultural identity etc) has proven ineffective, judging by the sustained – and in many cases rising – support for the radical right. The performance of the radical right in

the polls, however, is a misleading indicator, for the shift in public opinion towards more extreme attitudes in relation to a set of key social issues is far greater than the actual electoral support for parties of the radical right may indicate. Mainstreaming works in asymmetrical and unpredictable ways. While voters may still shy away from condoning the programme of a radical party or may still object to its political style, this does not stop them from actively endorsing, reproducing, and normalising aspects of its extreme discourse. Indeed, what is surprising is not that parties of the radical right have been increasingly successful in the polls, but that this success has not been more pronounced, given the degree of mainstream social support for some of their views. On their part, mainstream political forces may still defend a 'cordon sanitaire' of political marginalisation vis-a-vis parties of the radical right[72] but at the same time they may feel tempted to absorb significant parts of the radical right's populist agenda in order to regain the confidence of a disillusioned public (and, as I tried to show earlier, have already done so to an alarming extent, with no end to this tendency in sight).

Sounds familiar? History of course does not repeat itself. The conditions of the 1930s are thankfully not reproducible in today's world. A revival of fascism in its interwar guise is highly unlikely, and even less likely to succeed. A catastrophic collapse of democracy is almost inconceivable. Liberal rights are far more entrenched today and possess a far stronger aura of irreversibility; to attack them carries a notably stronger stigma – and this is something that most politicians of the radical right have understood only too well. Still, past failures contain lessons with on-going relevance. The reading of the events of the 1930s that I am offering provides little solace. It was the calamitous implosion of mainstream politics and society that catalysed the success of interwar fascism. It was 'mainstream' social demand that supplied fascist parties with votes, agenda-setting influence, staying power, and potential for rapid transnational diffusion. Above all, however, it was the failure of mainstream political and social actors to address, and respond to, the rise of right-wing extremism in interwar Europe that put in place the necessary conditions for the victory of fascism – with its calamitous consequences of totalitarianism, war, and mass violence. Mainstream society continues to harbour fears and resentments towards 'others' – not the same ones, to be sure, as in the 1930s but this is not the point. A 'crisis mindset', fed by the debilitating effects of global depression but reaching much further into existential insecurity and ingrained fears about

72 Jaap Van Donselaar, 'Patterns of Response to the Extreme Right in Western Europe,' in *Right-Wing Extremism in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Peter H. Merkl and Leonard Weinberg (London: Frank Cass, 2003), 263–281.

loss of identity, supplies a licence to treat those 'others' differently – less empathetically, more harshly, and more at odds with the same 'mainstream' values that continue in principle to underpin 'our' society. It was precisely on such disturbing lacunae that 'historic fascism' thrived in the interwar period. We cannot afford to lose sight of their enduring presence in the contemporary world.

I will go back to Deleuze as a fitting epilogue: since extremism and fascism are continually and actively (re)produced, their recurrence should alert us to every possible compromise with them.[73] The catastrophic complacency with which large sections of interwar elites and societies responded to the rise and success of fascism, the ways in which they overestimated the robustness of 'mainstream' defences against extremism or were willing to turn their back on them, is not without disturbing parallels in the post-9/11 and post-crisis world that we inhabit. Once again, extremism is a problem not only *for* but also *of* the mainstream. We need to try much, much harder.

73 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Continuum, 2004), 31–33.