

Revolutionary politics, the rise of fascism, and the politics of the body: Weimar Germany and now

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In *Fascism and Dictatorship*, his classic 1970 work on fascism, Nicos Poulantzas argued that the problem of fascism was reasserting itself. As imperialist capitalism moved into a new phase of crisis, “the question of the exceptional state (*État d’exception*), and so of fascism, is therefore posed once more; just as the question of the revolution itself is back on the agenda.”¹ This situation, he goes on to say, will be of long duration; today we thus can say that we remain in the horizon of this period, although the contexts have been transformed since 1970 for a variety of reasons, especially as a result of the demise of the Soviet experiment. If anything, the resurgence of the problem of fascism is far more evident in the wake of these changes, enabling the extension of American imperialism and the gradual rise of a radical right politics in the US and elsewhere that many have identified as proto-fascist. In this context, as Poulantzas suggested, an understanding of histories of fascism is important in attempting to come to grips with the contemporary situation.

This marks out the starting point of my discussion here. We are, I want to argue, in a pre-fascist phase. However, I mean this in a non-teleological way; fascism is not inevitable. As Poulantzas emphasizes, fascism emerged out of particular configurations of the class struggle, and through the concrete development of conditions enabling its rise, but these conditions did not impose it. Revolution too was on the agenda. Fascism thus was not a necessary outcome of either imperialist capitalism or its crises, nor was it a “pathological” form of capitalism, but rather it was “a form of State and of regime at the extreme ‘limit’ of the capitalist state...due to a quite particular conjuncture of the class struggle.”² What I am interested in, then, is the process by which fascism develops, the concrete struggles through which its emergence is contested. This is very much a contemporary question, but I want to approach it through an historical analysis, namely through a discussion of the mobilizations of the pre-fascist phase in Germany.

While Poulantzas provides an interesting starting point for my discussion, his analysis is severely limited by his lack of attention to what I will call the politics of the body, the complex ways in which bodies are materially constituted. This lack is most evident in the area of race. Despite the obvious centrality of racial ideologies to Nazism (anti-semitism in particular, but also other forms of racism), it warrants a scant mention in the book, set aside by Poulantzas as being outside the scope of the work. Crucial in this regard, and ironic in a work that argues fascism emerges out of a crisis in imperialism, colonialism too is not discussed. His analysis of fascism theorizes it as a response to imperialist crisis, but this is a purely abstracted system; any sense of the material practices of colonialism, in relation to which racism needs to be thought, is entirely absent.

This gap in Poulantzas’ work is one that in increasingly engaged in Marxist thought, but, especially in theorizations of fascism, this engagement still tends to be inadequate. The politics of the body, I will argue, needs to be brought into the heart of theorizations of imperialist crises and the rise of

¹ Nicos Poulantzas, *Fascism and Dictatorship: The Third International and the Problem of Fascism*, (London: NLB, 1974 [1970]), p. 11.

² Poulantzas, *Fascism and Dictatorship*, p. 57.

fascism. This is not simply an argument for a greater inclusion of more and different forms of oppression and struggle in historical writing, an addition to existing work. Rather, my argument is that historically the politics of the body marks out the material ways in which these struggles, including class struggles, have developed, and that this is evident both in the rise of fascism, and the struggles against it. This recognition, I will argue, requires a more profound rethinking of historical analysis, but this also has significant implications for political mobilization. Often a lack of attention to the connections between class struggle and other embodied forms of oppression and mobilization, but also a lack of attention to the class struggle as itself an embodied process, severely limited the ability of the left to develop a coherent and powerful resistance to fascism. Through an analysis of the conditions in Weimar Germany, then, and with an eye to the present, I will argue that our understanding of the rise of fascism and the problem of political mobilization needs to be rethought.

What is it that I mean by the politics of the body? In part, what I have in mind are the many forms of what today is often called “identity politics,” the debates and mobilizations around relations of difference: gender, sexuality, race, disability. Considering them as “identities,” however, tends to render them somewhat static, abstracted from material social relations. It is this materiality that I want to capture with the focus on the politics of the body. “Identities” are parts of broad and complex systems that are bound up with capitalist social relations; labour and class relations are themselves after all fundamentally embodied relations. But, these social relations of the body are also not reducible to class relations. The body came, especially over the course of the 19th century, to be the locus of very specific forms of social control and forms of domination, marking the gradual extension of the power of the state and capital.

By the early part of the 20th century in Germany as elsewhere, these practices of embodiment were especially associated with ideas of eugenics and social hygiene.³ This involved the configuration of bodies through metaphors and practices of degeneration, health and sickness. They served to organize the articulations of bodies and social structures in ways that are paralleled in today’s deployments of genetics, biometrics and other sciences of the body that are central to contemporary pre-fascism. Importantly, though, eugenics and social hygiene could be taken up in many ways; on the left as well as the right the body could serve as the terrain for projects of social transformation. While the implications of left projects were very different, I do want to argue that in many ways the left lacked a coherent oppositional or revolutionary politics of the body.

The left’s position here can be traced to a number of factors, not least the gendered anxieties flowing from the disruptions of war, revolution, reaction and inflation in the early 1920s, and of economic uncertainty and destitution at the end of the decade. Left orientations to the politics of the body were thus by no means identical to those of capital or of the right, but in important ways they did dovetail with hegemonic practices. What is especially important for my argument here, though, is the impact that these events had on left political mobilizations. Especially in the revolutionary upsurges during and in the immediate aftermath of the First World War women played central roles in challenging the militarist and imperialist practices of the state and capital, their mobilizations and radical consciousness formed by the specific gendered configurations of production and consumption during the war.⁴

³ Michael I Hau, *The Cult of Health and Beauty in Germany: A Social History, 1890-1930*, (Chicago, 2003); Paul I Weindling, *Health, Race, and German Politics Between National Unification and Nazism, 1870-1945*, (Cambridge, 1989).

⁴ Ute I Daniel, *The War from Within: German Working-Class Women in the First World War*, (Oxford, 1997); Belinda J. I Davis, *Home Fires Burning. Food, Politics and Everyday Life in World War I Berlin*, (Chapel Hill, 2000); Elisabeth Domansky, “Militarization and Reproduction in World War I Germany,” in Geoff Eley, ed., *Society, Culture and the State in Germany, 1870-1930*, (Ann Arbor, 1996).

Post-war counter-revolution thus involved the neutralization of women's mobilizations as well as, and in combination with, the gradual rolling back of the power of the left. Insofar as women's mobilizations were central to the development of revolutionary politics over the course of the war these two processes were intimately related, connections that were evident in the attacks by capital and the state, and especially by the proto-fascist militias (the *Freikorps*) in whose violent counter-revolutionary mobilizations issues of class and gender were deeply intertwined. These connections, although with many significant exceptions, were generally not recognized by the left. Especially around issues of work, the left's actions in fact served often to augment the impact of the attacks from the right. Trade unions and the left in general fought to push women out of the workforce, arguing that soldiers returning from the front should be able to displace women workers, but also that more generally men should be the primary family wage-earners. One important corollary of this reassertion of dominant gender ideologies and practices was that, by being excluded from wage labour, women also ended up being pushed out of workplace-based forms of political mobilization. In revolutionary Munich, for example, this almost entirely purged women from the Council movement in which they had begun to take a significant role, with the Councils deciding that women who were "exclusively or predominantly engaged in supporting their own families" would not be able to vote on Council issues.⁵ In this way the left thus undercut their own capacities for mobilizing and sustaining revolutionary action while giving ground to the right around the politics of the body. This was recognized by many activists, especially prominent women like Clara Zetkin, who fought often losing battles to maintain the gains they had made and to build on the socialist and feminist mobilizations that had emerged.⁶

It is these questions of mobilizations around issues of gender and sexuality that I want to build on here. Much of women's organizing throughout the war and the Weimar period offered productive challenges to left politics from the perspective of the politics of the body. Issues like access to food, the regulation of sexuality, or abortion and reproductive rights were all recurring loci around which mobilizations developed, among both working class and bourgeois women and feminist organizations. Counter-hegemonic movements also emerged around issues of sexuality, both in feminist movements and in fights for gay and lesbian rights, as well as in a range of other areas (anti-racist and anti-imperialist politics, questions of disability) relating to the politics of the body which I will not have the time to consider here. What I want to stress is that in all of these cases these mobilizations had strong connections with the left, but that these connections were often complex and fraught.

That these kinds of oppositional movements developed is not surprising as they represented key axes of domination intersecting through Weimar society. Regulation of bodies, exemplified in visions of social hygiene, were central to bourgeois society and the state, but what is especially important here is that they also marked out key areas around which the radical right and the Nazis mobilized. Violent interventions around the politics of the body were crucial to fascist mobilizing. This was clearly the case in relation to public violence (attacks on Jews, women, workers, homeless, disabled, categories which were intertwined in the fascist imaginary), but these were the more visible manifestations of deeper structural changes that developed out of the complex interactions of the right, capital, and the bourgeois state. Right-wing violence was enabled by the state as a mechanism for containing the left and stabilizing capitalism in crisis (the exceptional state discussed by Poulantzas), with these processes operating in crucial ways around the policing of the body. The body, I want to argue, became in many ways the ground on which the stabilization of capitalism took place. While part of the class struggle, however, the impacts of this are not reducible to that struggle. As well, fascist mobilizations were used by the state and

⁵ 11Quoted in Christiane Sternsdorf-Hauck, Brotmarken und rote Fahnen: Frauen in der bayrischen Revolution und Räterepublik, 1918-1919, (Frankfurt am Main, 1989), pp. 41-43, quote p. 43.

⁶ 1See Clara Zetkin, "Die Novemberrevolution 1918 und die Frauen," [1918] and "Frauen für die Räte, die Frauen in die Räte!" [1919] in Florence Hervé, ed., Frauenbewegung und revolutionäre Arbeiterbewegung: Texte zur Frauenemanzipation in Deutschland und in der BRD von 1848 bis 1980, (Frankfurt am Main, 1981), pp. 64-70.

capital, but it is important to highlight that this was not solely an instrumental relationship. That is, fascist organizing developed its own logics and momentum that had a certain autonomy from the immediate demands of counter-revolutionary class struggle.

Over the course of the Weimar period important state structures, in particular the precarious and newly established liberal state apparatus, were broken down through attacks from, and accommodations with, the radical right. Police and the courts, for example, became increasingly tolerant of right wing violence over the last number of years of the Weimar period (even in places like Berlin where the SPD was in power), but these shifts also included much more repressive policies towards women in public space, gay and lesbian subcultures, beggars (many of whom were disabled veterans), and other 'undesireable' populations. Attacks on the working class and the left were challenged, especially by the communists, but this was much less so with the other cases. As I mentioned earlier, left actions in the case of working women in fact served ultimately to reinforce these shifts.

These erosions of the legal protections of the liberal bourgeois state thus proceeded in a reactionary direction, especially in the later Weimar years.⁷ The significance of these erosions is central to my argument here. It is these processes that I have in mind when speaking of 'pre-fascism,' representing the longer-term opening up of the space for the Nazi seizure of power through the incremental reconfiguration of key social structures. Important liberal legal protections, welfare state policies, labour laws and collective bargaining structures, and other important structures that had developed in the pre-Weimar and especially the early Weimar years were increasingly subverted in ways that enabled the rise of fascism.

The centrality of the politics of the body in these complex shifts can be seen especially strongly in the contestations over women's sexuality, abortion and reproductive rights. As Atina Grossmann's fine study has shown, these fights played a prominent role in the later Weimar period, albeit one that has largely disappeared from view in historical accounts of the period. The fight against paragraph 218 of the constitution that criminalized abortion in particular had gone on for a number of years, but experienced its high point during the late 1920s and early 1930s. Challenges to the law were primarily led by left feminist movements, with the main bourgeois feminist organizations remaining outside the struggle. Helene Stöcker's "League for the Protection of Motherhood and Sex Reform," established in 1929, was an especially significant group. The League not only fought for abortion rights, but challenged many dominant conceptions of reproduction and sexuality, including arguing for the importance of women's sexual emancipation and satisfaction as a key element of sex reform. This was put into practice in various clinics and other forms of public education and intervention that experienced a significant popular support and participation. The League and other radical sex reform groups thus challenged dominant constructions and practices of gender and sexuality as well as the specific laws around abortion, opening up the space for the emergence of more radical forms of embodied politics. These movements represented significant challenges to the power of the state and of the radical right, challenges that, as evidenced by the police and right repression directed at them, were clearly recognized by those authorities.⁸

⁷ By this I simply mean to suggest that the revolutionary left likewise challenged the legitimacy and power of that state, but did so in very different ways. The undermining of the power of the state, I want to argue, could occur in very different ways, with very different potential outcomes.

⁸ Atina Grossmann, *Reforming Sex: The German Movement for Birth Control and Abortion Reform, 1920-1950*. The challenges could be ambivalent, however, questioning dominant notions of sexuality but also often sustaining patriarchal and heterosexual norms. For example, Dr. Max Hodann, an important figure in the movement, repeatedly emphasized that "[t]here is no such thing as a frigid woman, only incompetent men." This challenged dominant medical and psychiatric views of women's sexuality, but continued to emphasize the performance principle and was inscribed in a very hetero-normative and patriarchal framework: "The sexual personality of a woman," he went on to

This repression was in part the result of the ties that developed between these feminist movements and the left, a combination that proved to be a powerful mobilizing force. Nevertheless, the radical left was never able to fully engage in this process. The KPD was the only party to have consistently opposed paragraph 218, but they too emphasized the need for strong state and medical control over birth control and abortion, albeit in the context of a state that they also sought to revolutionize.⁹ Especially through the EpS (*Einheits Verband für Proletarische Sexual Reform*) founded in 1931 the KPD attempted to bring together struggles around sexuality and reproductive rights with the class struggle, although these attempts at building coalitions was not always successful. The KPD's approach often involved the instrumentalization of these relationships in terms of the class struggle, and the emphasis on state intervention ran counter to many of the grassroots tendencies that animated the movements. As a result, the alliances that developed were often uneasy, but they nevertheless had a great resonance both within and beyond the party. Left intellectuals and artists of various slants contributed to the struggle. Käthe Kollwitz, Alfred Döblin, Erwin Piscator, and the communist doctor Friedrich Wolf were among the many that produced works challenging the criminalization of abortion. The film *Kuhle Wampe* by Ernst Ottwalt and Bertolt Brecht juxtaposed images of men looking for work with women looking for illegal abortions, suggesting that they represented a twin crisis in capitalism.¹⁰

These mobilizations challenged bourgeois views of gender and sexuality and state policies, but more importantly they were powerful movements that sought to contest the growing hegemony of the right and to contain and redirect the gradual undermining of the bourgeois state discussed earlier. They thus offered a glimpse of the potential power of pluralized mobilizations involving the organized left and movements forming around the politics of the body. These interactions also worked to broaden the political culture of the left, especially insofar as it had become increasingly masculinized and even militarized under the impact of the sustained and mutually reinforcing assaults of the state and fascism.¹¹ In the case of struggles over reproductive rights and sexuality the left participated, often not wholeheartedly, in mobilizations that in fact expanded the scope of radical politics, pushed the development of state support for things like sex clinics, challenged the power of the right around the politics of the body, articulated new connections between class struggle and other forms of oppression, and in general brought together new and larger groups of activists. While not ultimately successful in having abortion decriminalized, these events pointed to possible forms of mobilization that opened out of the class struggle onto broader and more complex forms of resistance.

What I have thus sought to argue here is that the pre-fascist period in Germany was one in which, as Poulantzas argued, both fascism and revolution were on the table. Contrary to his argument, though, I have stressed the ways in which this pre-fascist phase involved the gradual transformation of key social structures through a politics that, while involving class struggle, was articulated in important ways through the politics of the body. With some important exceptions, though, it was in this dimension that the organized left failed to challenge, and in some cases aided, the development of pre-fascist conditions.

It is these contexts that provide important parallels with contemporary pre-fascist developments, and suggest directions for radical mobilizing. Conditions today are clearly different in a number of important ways, not least in the absence of strong and mass-based labour and radical left movements or parties. While an analysis of these parallels and differences is beyond the scope of this talk, I will simply

argue, "unfolds only under the hands of a man." (Quoted p. 34)

⁹ Grossmann, *Reforming Sex*, pp. 35-37.

¹⁰ Karen Hagemann, ed., *Eine Frauensache Alltagsleben und Geburten-politik 1919-1933*, (Pfaffenweiler, 1991), pp. 155-163; John Willett, *The Theatre of the Weimar Republic*, (New York, 1988), pp. 130-131; Gisela Schirmer, *Käthe Kollwitz und die Kunst ihrer Zeit: Positionen zur Geburtenpolitik*, (Weimar, 1998).

¹¹ Eric D. Weitz, *Creating German Communism, 1890-1990. From Popular Protests to Socialist State*, (Princeton, 1997).

point to the issues of sexuality, reproductive rights and abortion that I have discussed at the end here. As was the case in the Weimar period, much of the organizing of the right in the US and elsewhere has developed around a policing of women's bodies and reproductive capacities. This is obvious in the sense that anti-abortion groups form an important part of Bush's political base. More importantly, though, it is around abortion and the politics of the body more generally that both the power of the left and many of the structures of the bourgeois state are being challenged and eroded. This is the case, for example, throughout the US judicial system where, in incremental ways, the issue of abortion has been used to break down judicial independence. Internationally, US activities in international organizations from the UN to the World Bank, as well as their deployment of foreign aid, have incorporated issues of reproductive rights as central components in their strategies of extending imperialist projects and forms of control. In terms of radical organizing, then, these are connections to the politics of the body, I want to argue, need to be at the centre of our analyses and mobilizations.