

This is an Open Access document downloaded from ORCA, Cardiff University's institutional repository: <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/157983/>

This is the author's version of a work that was submitted to / accepted for publication.

Citation for final published version:

Ince, Anthony 2023. 'Fishhook populism'? From the liberal centre to the far right and back again. *Space and Polity* 27 (3) , pp. 335-341. 10.1080/13562576.2023.2196614

Publishers page: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562576.2023.2196614>

Please note:

Changes made as a result of publishing processes such as copy-editing, formatting and page numbers may not be reflected in this version. For the definitive version of this publication, please refer to the published source. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite this paper.

This version is being made available in accordance with publisher policies. See <http://orca.cf.ac.uk/policies.html> for usage policies. Copyright and moral rights for publications made available in ORCA are retained by the copyright holders.



# **'Fishhook populism'? From the liberal centre to the far right and back again**

**Anthony Ince**

School of Geography and Planning, Cardiff University

InceA@cardiff.ac.uk

## **Keywords**

Centrism, fascism, ideology, right-wing populism

## **Abstract**

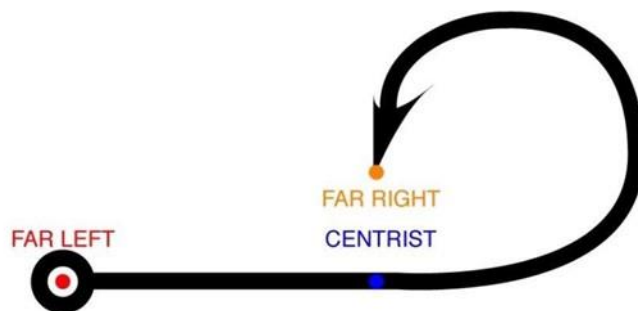
This provocation engages with the often-overlooked role of centrism in the mainstreaming of the far-right, and how they are bridged by the populist right. There are three key mechanisms through which this takes place. First, centrism provides an institutional platform through resonances within and beyond the liberal state; second, it creates discursive space through civic values; and third, it provides ideological opportunities through a *realpolitik* of 'rationality' and 'balance'. Attention to fascist-enabling practices of the centre, I argue, also highlights how civic values of care can be mobilised by right-populist tendencies through liberal institutions such as civil society and charity.

Alexander Reid Ross' 2017 book *Against the Fascist Creep* has become recognised as a pivotal analysis of how fascism (both classical and neo-fascist varieties) 'creeps' into non-fascist – including left-wing – political discourse and institutions. Not only does it do this through quasi-leftist appeals to liberation and rebirth but also through its proximity to the mainstream populist right. In the latter, fascism finds a close ally through which to seed its ideologies, discourses, and activists, into mainstream political spaces. The far right has many definitions and typologies, and the blurring of the boundaries between populist illiberalism and the neo-fascist far-right is one of the ways in which Reid Ross' account explains the creep of fascist principles and people.

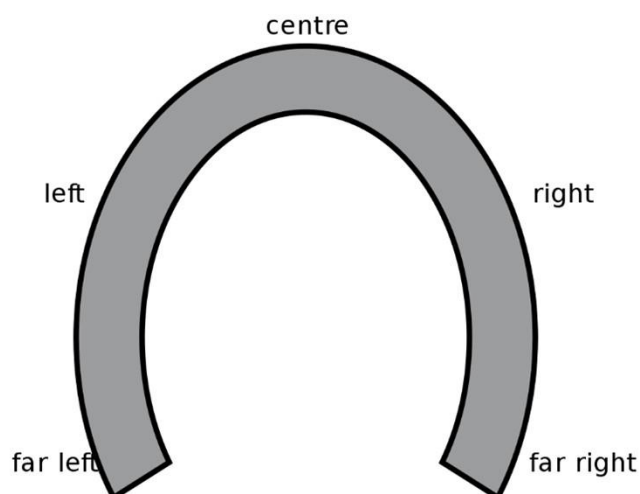
For the purpose of this brief essay, I follow Renton (1999), who rejects definitions of fascism as simply a particularly extreme right-wing policy agenda, arguing instead for an understanding that recognises the complex interplay between an ultraconservative and reactionary ideology and its manifestation rooted in a specific geographical and historical context. This attends to both its ideological dimensions and the role of geography (and history) in the constitution of fascist politics *in practice*. Deleuze and Guattari's (1984) writings on how fascistic tendencies can inhabit even the most 'apolitical' minutiae of daily life take this spatio-temporal contextualisation further, calling for an understanding of fascism that is attentive to everyday practices, desires, and emotions beyond the formally political realm. In this sense, it is not enough to be passively non-fascist; instead, antifascist principles should be embedded into everyday life itself. What Deleuze and Guattari highlight is what Reid Ross also identifies: that the *de jure* non-fascist nature of contemporary societies – especially liberal democracies – is imbued deeply, if quietly, with unarticulated *de facto* fascist currents. Right-wing populism acts as a crucial conduit between the centre and these currents by introducing interpretations of nominally 'mainstream' values that give discursive space to more radical political answers. The pipeline between mainstream conservatism and white supremacist movements in the USA is a particularly clear example of this (Luger, 2022). However, the centre of the political spectrum "as a form of political consciousness" (Pendakis, 2010: 23) has often been overlooked by researchers of right-populism and the far right, despite extensive consideration of its policy effects elsewhere, such as the incorporation of neoliberal economics into centre-right neoconservatism and the centre-left 'Third Way' from the late 1970s onwards. By considering the relationship between the populist right and centrism, we can begin to understand how this 'creep' operates in practice.

Enter the 'fishhook theory', which emerged around the same time as Reid Ross' book: a partially tongue-in-cheek challenger to the largely discredited but well-established 'horseshoe theory' of political ideologies, whereby far-left and far-right loop back towards each other, leaving the political centre aloft as the supposed pinnacle of political rationality. The fishhook theory emerged as an

effort by antifascists to visualise how the centre of politics accommodates, and sometimes facilitates, the mainstreaming of the populist right, as a discursive and ideological bridge to fascism. It has not been discussed at length or elaborated conceptually because of its semi-serious nature, a critique of the horseshoe theory rather than a well-developed alternative to it. Indeed, the name itself has a satirical edge: the horseshoe theory, like a hook to a fish, baits and traps the naïve onlooker who finds a simple answer (the juicy worm) to uncomfortable political realities.



*Fig. 1: the fishhook theory* (Berlatsky, 2018: n.p.)



*Fig. 2: the horseshoe theory* (ibid.)

While we should exercise caution in relation to the complexities of political strategy and ideology<sup>1</sup>, and although the fishhook theory reproduces some flaws of horseshoe theory (e.g. failing to account for different levels of authoritarianism and libertarianism), it highlights the political centre in relation to populism and fascism in three main ways. First, critical attention to the self-presentation of

centrism as the enlightened defender of ‘balance’, ‘rationality’, and ‘free speech’ in political debate pinpoints how the centre and its institutions actively make space for relatively unhindered expression of populist-right views and for adherents to populate positions of power (e.g. Ivănescu and Filimon, 2020; Papanicolaou and Papageorgiou, 2016), even though the two have markedly different interpretations of these terms. This is especially pronounced in some contexts, such as Finland, where centrism is connected not so much to classical liberalism but to an understated traditionalist conservatism. Nonetheless, it has long been argued that fascism is an outgrowth of liberalism, broadly defined; an “intimate insider” (Landa, 2009: 9) that sought to rectify liberal democracy’s internal contradictions (e.g. Dauvé, 1982; Fabbri, 2005; Guerin, 2016). After all, liberal democracy has always maintained unjust systems until pressure from below forces it to capitulate (Mondon and Winter, 2020). Liberal institutions evolved to facilitate an agonistic ‘balance’ of opposing views, and the neutral implementation of laws, but have been repeatedly used by far-right tendencies for their own *illiberal* ends. This is not simply a case of far-right opportunism but also of sharing some common values, symbolism and discourses, such as national pride, duty to the state, the primacy of the nuclear family, border controls, and law and order.

The centrist assertion of superior rationality – often linked to legitimate concerns about the emotional drivers that populism feeds from – inadvertently facilitates populist-right tropes of ‘telling it like it is’ or cutting through politicians’ doublespeak in favour of ‘facts’ or ‘truth’. There are certainly fundamental conflicts between the centrist rhetoric of free speech and that of the right-populists, not least because of the work undertaken by the former in countering the assertions of the latter with well-researched data. Nonetheless, this foregrounding of rationality provides opportunities for populist-right perspectives to articulate themselves legitimately in public debate, in the hope that exposure will delegitimise their ideas. On the contrary, this has the effect of emboldening and mainstreaming them, and their neighbours on the far right. It is repeatedly evident that confronting the populist right through rational debate alone is ineffective, since their identity of victimhood gains strength precisely through the clash between the technocratic rationality of the centre and their emotive sense of speaking ‘truth’ (Al-Ghazzi, 2021; Anderson and Secor, 2022; Maronitis, 2021)<sup>ii</sup>.

Secondly, the conflation of centrality with neutrality obscures the hegemonic agency of the so-called “extreme centre” (Ali, 2015). Extreme centrism has been understood as a form of “authoritarian liberalism” (Wilkinson, 2016) that maligns – indeed, often ruthlessly crushes – left-wing alternatives to its dominant order. When the centre is under threat from left and right, its adherents can become cynical towards democracy *per se* (Adler, 2018) and are prepared to risk their own stability to block or punish a leftward swing through acquiescence to right-wing populism (e.g. Graeber, 2020).

Ironically, then, the anti-populist centre can thereby end up summoning precisely the authoritarianism it purports to confront (Landa, 2009). Just as significant as its authoritarian capacities, though, centuries of Enlightenment political theory have constructed the centre as a Cartesian, geometrically neutral space of balance, equilibrium, and stability (Pendakis, 2010). Indeed, geographers have identified how this is bound up with a certain *spatial* imaginary that reinforces the supposedly natural and benign nature of state territoriality (Elden, 2013; Ince and Barrera, 2016). This mythology of 'neutral' centre-ness presents it not as a distinct ideological framework or set of values but the opposite thereof: a political fantasy that allows its adherents to evade culpability on the basis of technocratic, balanced management of society, somehow above the dirty world of ideology:

“[T]he extreme centre performs the middle as if it were a space of rigorous, even dialectical contention, "liberated territory" continually protected by reason against the stupid, ruining predations of left and right. The centre is not one political option among others... but an extreme attentiveness to the real” (Pendakis, 2010: 12).

This “attentiveness to the real”, the third dynamic of centrism highlighted by fishhook theory, brings into closer focus the *realpolitik* of centrism: not only are technical adjustments the only (viable, legitimate, reasonable) alternatives to the present order, but also there are circumscribed manners of addressing such questions and problems that align with pre-existing rationalities of governance and decision-making. Therefore, notions of 'balance' embedded in centrism are strongly associated with a liberal vision of civic virtue and engagement that pivots around a balance between individual rights on one hand, and civility, duty, hard work, and deference to authority on the other (e.g. Bonotti, 2014; Patrick, 2012). This has spatialised consequences – even with the so-called 'radical' centre, (Pendakis, 2019) which presents itself as experimental and risk-taking – by producing a hardened distinction between legitimate civil society spaces (e.g. community centres) and illegitimate ones (e.g. occupations, strikes, squatting). This delegitimises certain political-spatial forms that are deemed uncivil, including popular traditions of antifascism which might involve elements of illegality.

As Zerilli (2014: 116) notes, civility “has always relied on a highly homogeneous conception of the public, a conception in which mostly white, mostly male citizens found themselves in an unsurprising agreement about the fundamental moral and political values of... liberal democracy”. What makes something 'civil' to the political centre is tied to a particular epistemological pivot of the hegemon. Further, Zerilli emphasises how civility, and civil society institutions, “often [remain] at a level of intersubjective ethical action, which does not necessarily translate into action in concert” (2014:

118). This provides a foundation for two things that unite centrism and right-populism: differentiating between ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ groups, and detaching individual experiences of injustice from the structures that reproduce it. Both these logics can be crucial pathways for the mainstreaming of far-right perspectives (Mondon and Winter, 2020). Thus, although the outward *incivility* of populism conflicts with the *civility* of the centre, the latter provides ample opportunities for the former by creating hierarchies of virtue and value between different groups of people.

There are, of course, fundamental differences between the political centre and the populist right, and it would be disingenuous to conflate them. Nonetheless, while the fishhook theory was never intended to be ‘scientific’, it pushes scholars – who may often be reasonably comfortable with the liberal status quo – to think more critically about the ‘work’ done by centrism. It encourages us to look for the foundations of right-populism within the ordinary spaces and practices of everyday life. Charity and voluntarism, for example, have become fields of civic engagement for the populist- and far-right. Neo-fascist foodbanks and homeless outreach may sound like an oxymoron but in the last 10-15 years they have operated regularly in various European countries. One example is the ‘civic circles’ in Hungary, which mobilised nominally apolitical cultural institutions, recreational clubs, and civil society organisations to produce a powerful network of right-populist and ultraconservative grassroots supporters, scaling outward and upward and eventually springboarding *Fidesz* into power (Greskovits, 2017). In the US, right-populist militias, epitomised by groups such as the Oath Keepers, have been undertaking various forms of community volunteering for over a decade, as has the more explicitly neo-Nazi Golden Dawn party in Greece. Civic action, typically understood as a central pillar of liberal polities, has quietly become a new frontline in the right-populist creep.

The populist right does nowadays what ‘classical’ fascism has always done: adapt itself, chameleon-like, to particular conditions and contexts to maximise its appeal and perceived legitimacy. Attention to the political centre highlights how this operates in practice. In this short essay it has been impossible to do justice to the wide range of everyday phenomena – such as expressions of, and contestations over, masculinity or religion – that contribute to the political topology of the fishhook. Nonetheless, to identify the sociospatial dimensions of this “fascist creep”, without overlooking the seeds buried deep in the heart of the liberal centre, could be a useful – albeit uncomfortable – first step.

## References

- Adler, D.R.K. (2018) 'The centrist paradox: political correlates of the democratic disconnect' *SSRN*. Available from: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3214467> [Accessed 16 June 2021].
- Al-Ghazzi, O. (2021) 'We will be great again: historical victimhood in populist discourse' *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 24(1): 45-59.
- Ali, T. (2015) *The Extreme Centre: A Warning*. London: Verso.
- Anderson, B. and Secor, A. (2022) 'Propositions on right-wing populism: Available, excessive, optimistic' *Political Geography*, 96. DOI:10.1016/j.polgeo.2022.102608
- Bonotti, M. (2014) 'Political liberalism, free speech and public reason' *European Journal of Political Philosophy*, 14(2): 180-208.
- Dauvé, G. (1982) *Fascism/Anti-Fascism*. [Online] Available from : [https://libcom.org/files/Gilles%20Dauvé-%20Fascism\\_Anti-Fascism.pdf](https://libcom.org/files/Gilles%20Dauvé-%20Fascism_Anti-Fascism.pdf) [Accessed 21 June 2021]
- Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. (1984) *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. London: Athlone Press.
- Elden, S. (2013) *The Birth of Territory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Fabbri, L. (2005 [1922]) *Preventative Counter-revolution*. London: Kate Sharpley Library.
- Graeber, D. (2020) 'The center blows itself up: care and spite in the "Brexit election"' *The New York Review*, 13 January. [Online] Available from: <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2020/01/13/the-center-blows-itself-up-care-and-spite-in-the-brexit-election/> [Accessed 16 December 2021]
- Greskovits, B. (2017) 'Rebuilding the Hungarian right through civil organisation and contention: the Civic Circles movement' *EUI Working Paper RSCAS 2017/37*. Badia Fiesolana: European University Institute.
- Guerin, D. (2016 [1939]) *Fascism and Big Business*. New York: Pathfinder Press.
- Ince, A. and Barrera, G. (2016) 'For post-statist geographies' *Political Geography*, 55(1): 10-19.
- Ivănescu, M. and Filimon, L-M. (2020) 'Mainstream fringes or fringe mainstream? An assessment of radical right (re)alignments in the European Parliament after the 2014 and 2019 elections' *European Review*. DOI:10.1017/S1062798720000976.
- Landa, I. (2009) *The Apprentice's Sorcerer: Liberal Tradition and Fascism*. Leiden: Brill.
- Luger, J. (2022) 'Celebrations, exaltations and Alpha-lands: Everyday geographies of the far-right' *Political Geography*, 96. DOI:10.1016/j.polgeo.2022.102604



- Maronitis, K. (2021) 'The present is a foreign country: Brexit and the performance of victimhood' *British Politics*. DOI:10.1057/s41293-020-00151-7.
- Mondon, A. and Winter, A. (2020) *Reactionary Democracy: How Racism and the Populist Far Right became Mainstream*. London: Verso.
- Papanicolaou, G. and Papageorgiou, I. (2016) 'The police and the far right in Greece: a case study of police voting behaviour in Athens' *Crime, Law and Social Change*, 66(4): 397-419.
- Patrick, R. (2012) 'Work as the primary "duty" of the responsible citizen: a critique of the work-centric approach' *People, Place and Policy*, 6(1): 5-15.
- Pendakis, A.J. (2010) *The Dialectics of Middleness: Towards a Political Ontology of Centrism*. Unpublished PhD thesis, McMaster University.
- Reid Ross, A. (2017) *Against the Fascist Creep*. Oakland and Edinburgh: AK Press.
- Renton, D. (1999) *Fascism: Theory and Practice*. London: Pluto Press.
- Shekhovtsov, A. (2017) *Russia and the Western Far Right: Tango Noir*. London: Routledge.
- Wilkinson, M. (2016) 'The Brexit referendum and the crisis of "extreme centrism"' *German Law Journal* 17, pp. 131-142.
- Zerilli, L.M.G. (2014) 'Against civility: a feminist perspective' in Sarat, A. [ed.] *Civility, Legality and Justice in America*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 107-131.

---

<sup>i</sup> For example, so-called 'red-brown' alliances between state socialist and fascist/ultranationalist tendencies are well documented (Reid Ross, 2017; Shekhovtsov, 2017).

<sup>ii</sup> This said, the mythical notion of objectivity that is enveloped in centrist appeals to 'facts' arguably has its own emotional resonance that all-too-easily goes unacknowledged.