

Educating the *Volksgemeinschaft*. Authoritarian ideals and school reforms in Europe's fascist era

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In recent years, the scholarly treatment of fascism has changed. Older studies tended to focus on single regimes (generally, Italy, Germany, or Spain), treating each of them as a self-contained unit whose programme and politics depended entirely on national historical developments. In the last few years, however, several studies have not only disclosed similarities between different fascist regimes and movements across Europe, but have also shown how their mutual relationships and exchanges shaped their ideology and practices.¹ These literatures demonstrate that a “fascist wind’ blew across interwar European state borders”, rendering fascism “a genuine global-transnational doctrine with diverse reformulations, ramifications, and permutations”.² Fascist movements all over Europe founded their political preferences and policies on the principles of the (racial) superiority of the native monistically conceived *Volksgemeinschaft*, as well as the superiority of authoritarianism and a strong charismatic leadership over liberal democracy. In general, educational institutions, from the family, to youth organisations, to schooling, were considered crucial, as they provided a theatre in which of a strong, healthy national community could be moulded. Motivated by these insights, this Special Issue represents a first attempt to integrate this novel conception of pre- and interwar fascism into the history of

¹ E.g., Federico Finchelstein, *Transatlantic Fascism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Andrea Mammone, *Transnational neofascism in France and Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

² Mammone, *Transnational neofascism*, p. 15.

education.

Axel Honneth calls education the “twin-sister of democratic theory”.³ Indeed the political philosopher argues that without appropriately designed educational organisations, democratic structures would be virtually impossible. In the light of today’s growing concerns about the increasing appeal of alt-, radical-, and new-right movements and their positions, the relationship between political ideology and education acquires renewed relevance. The question arises, does authoritarianism also have a twin sister?

This question formed the basis of a conference panel we convened at the 2017 European Conference on Educational Research in Copenhagen. The panel triggered a discussion among several scholars interested in the educational ideas and practices of authoritarian regimes and movements across Europe. It also revealed that the relationship between the education sector and authoritarianism in the occupied territories, or territories that found themselves surrounded by fascist regimes remains almost virgin territory. Therefore, this Special Issue aims to bring together studies that shed light on developments in countries outside of the traditional cradles of fascism. More specifically, the papers collected here discuss the importance authoritarian movements attributed to education and schooling in view of the construction of a *Volksgemeinschaft*, in Belgium, Switzerland, Latvia, Czechoslovakia, Norway, France and Ukraine.

We ask: did interwar fascist and extreme-right organisations espouse distinctive education reforms, and what role did education play in achieving their political aims? This collection of perspectives from different countries at fascism’s ‘periphery’ uncovers the heterogeneous nature of authoritarian educational discourses and reforms in interwar and wartime Europe. The articles vividly demonstrate how, in the 1920s and 1930s, the proliferation of fascism

³ Axel Honneth, Erziehung und demokratische Öffentlichkeit. *Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft*, 15(3), 2012, 430.

stirred new dynamics in education circles across Europe and forced them to take a stance. The positions that were chosen, by sympathisers and opponents alike, are much more multifaceted and interwoven than the traditional dichotomy between authoritarianism and democracy might suggest. Even if education was indeed an inherent part of fascists' common struggle for a new authoritarian and nativist *Volksgemeinschaft*, corresponding conceptions of schooling, not to mention the specific reforms, varied greatly. The articles grouped in this Special Issue evidence that this variance cannot be explained solely by referring to local conditions and specificities, as has often been suggested in the literature. Instead, the basic idea of an authoritarian or nativist reform of schooling in itself is ambiguous, and its boundaries with the concepts and methods deployed to sustain other forms of politics remain fuzzy. While the (planned) interventions in the field of education traced in the following contributions are indisputably intrusive, their ambiguities, and controversial and changing nature show how educational institutions are a delicate issue in the definition and enforcement of authoritarian regimes. This renders the topic even more enlightening for discussing and theorising the political nature of education, as well as the relationship between democracy and schooling in particular.