

**H**ow did socialists in interwar Europe interpret fascism as it was evolving in the period? Taking a broad sociology of knowledge approach, this article examines the significant variety and complexity of socialist interpretations of fascism, but also the ways in which organisational interests, competitive inter-socialist relations, and situational forces shaped and constrained these analyses. Furthermore, it explores the ways in which socialist defeats and the detachment of intellectuals from socialist organisations produced creative ruptures in socialist knowledge about fascism. The vigour, diversity, and richness of the knowledge on fascism produced by socialists in the interwar period can be of significant contemporary value to the Left as it faces an expanding, enigmatic far-right.

# Confronting Fascism: Socialist Knowledge and the Far Right in Interwar Europe

---

CHAMSY EL-OJEILI

In the mid-1930s, Ernst Bloch described fascism as a ‘heterogeneous surprise’.<sup>1</sup> In this article, I explore the ways in which European socialists interpreted this surprise. From 1919, socialist intellectuals were confronted with a novel, unexpected, and profoundly unsettling phenomenon, a complex and contradictory panorama of ideas, a shifting, disparate transnational movement, and, eventually, established regimes that were able to destroy powerful socialist organisations. In this period, fascism was critically analysed and opposed in a variety of ways by liberals, conservatives, Christians, atheists, feminists, and national liberationists from the non-European world.<sup>2</sup> However, it was the broad socialist tradition that, whether measured by numbers, militancy, or depth and variety of analysis, did the heavy lifting in the analysis of, and opposition to, fascism

---

1 Ernst Bloch, ‘Nonsynchronism and the Obligation to its Dialectics,’ *New German Critique* 11 (1977 [1935]): 27.

2 Nigel Copsey and Andrzej Olechnowicz, eds., *Varieties of Anti-Fascism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Kaper Brasken, David J. Featherstone, and Nigel Copsey, eds., *Anti-Fascism in a Global Perspective: Transnational Networks, Exile Communities, and Radical Internationalism* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2020).

in the interwar period.<sup>3</sup> Fascism's ferocious anti-socialism, its intensity, expansion, and violence, demanded explanatory, evaluative, and political attention on the part of socialists.

Three broad concerns frame what follows. First, in the scholarly literature, socialist interpretations of, and strategic orientations towards, fascism are often simplified and caricatured, or, in the case of anarchism and council communism, largely ignored.<sup>4</sup> Socialist analyses of fascism tend to be characterised as economically reductionist, crudely functionalist, abstract, dangerously aloof, or cynical exercises in political manoeuvring.<sup>5</sup> Against such reductionism or disregard, I insist that socialist encounters with fascism were rich and complex, and that they remain compelling.

Second, I illuminate this variety and complexity in socialist interpretations of fascism by taking a broad sociology-of-knowledge approach. While the sociology of knowledge has ceased to exist as a significant subfield, its abiding concern with the ways in which knowledge is shaped by group-belonging, competition, organisations, institutions, and social forces remains compelling as an orientation for understanding ideological change. In this article, I foreground the environments that moulded the socialist production of knowledge about fascism. Belonging

---

3 David Beetham, *Marxists in the Face of Fascism: Writings by Marxists on Fascism From the Inter-War Period* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983); Larry Ceplair, *Under the Shadow of War: Fascism, Anti-Fascism, and Marxists, 1918–1939* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).

4 Beetham, *Marxists in the Face of Fascism*.

5 For discrepant instances of such characterisations, see Ceplair, *Under the Shadow*; A. James Gregor, *Interpretations of Fascism* (New Jersey: General Learning Press, 1974), 129–170; Stanley G. Payne, *Fascism: Comparison and Definition* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1980), 9, 179–80; Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (London: Routledge, 1991), 2–4; Maurice Blinkhorn, *Fascism and the Right in Europe 1919–1945* (Essex: Longman, 2000), 94–6; Kevin Passmore, *Fascism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 14–17; Michael Mann, *Fascists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 17–23; David Renton, *Fascism: Theory and Practice, 2nd ed.* (London: Pluto Press, 2020); George Mosse, *The Fascist Revolution: Toward a General Theory of Fascism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2021), 18–20.

or non-belonging to socialist organisations mattered in the production of knowledge about fascism. The internal environments of these organisations—size, composition, resources, doctrines, practices, and apparatuses—and their competitive relationships with other organisations also mattered. More widely, the knowledge that socialists produced was situated within, and its contours moulded by, particular constellations of local, national, and global forces. In addition, the dislocating effects of crisis events or more slowly unfolding processes could produce major ‘reality problems’ that had knowledge-transforming consequences.<sup>6</sup>

My third concern is more contemporary and conditioned by the energetic expansion of the far-Right today. An enormous literature has quickly been assembled in response to this development, and a good part of it attempts to measure the distance between our time and the interwar period, between today’s Right and fascism.<sup>7</sup> This return to fascism—certainly as a topic, arguably as a movement, an ideology, or, at least, a ‘nebula of attitudes’, an ‘emotional lava’, a set of ‘mobilising passions’—means that a critical reconsideration of seminal socialist efforts to visualise what was a new, obscure, and threatening phenomenon in the interwar period is of more than casual or merely historical scholarly interest.<sup>8</sup> The Christchurch mosque attacks of 2019 and the events at parliament in 2022 indicate that Aotearoa New Zealand is not immune to what has been described as ‘the fascist creep’.<sup>9</sup>

---

6 Jeffrey C. Alexander, ‘Modern, Anti, Post and Neo,’ *New Left Review* 1/210 (1995): 63–101.

7 For a handful of very different examples, see Madeleine Albright, *Fascism: A Warning* (New York: Harper, 2018); Carl Boggs, *Fascism Old and New: American Politics at the Crossroads* (London: Routledge, 2018); Cas Mudde, *The Far Right Today* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019); Mark Sedgwick, ed., *Key Thinkers of the Radical Right: Behind the New Threat to Liberal Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019); Enzo Traverso, *The New Faces of Fascism: Populism and the Far Right* (London: Verso, 2019); Samir Gandesha, ed., *Spectres of Fascism: Historical, Theoretical and International Perspectives* (London: Pluto Press, 2020).

8 Robert O. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 40, 41.

9 Alexander Reid Ross, *Against the Fascist Creep* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2017).

In the two major sections that follow, I first emphasise the variety and complexity of socialist understandings of fascism, which were nonetheless profoundly shaped and limited by engagement within competing organisations; second, I consider the ways in which dislocating crises and detachment from previously strong organisations produced creative ruptures in socialist knowledge about fascism. In my concluding comments, I underscore the continuing value of these accounts, which provide a multidimensional research programme for the contemporary Left as it faces an expanding far-Right.

---

The Italian fascism that emerged in March 1919 combined a quite disparate set of demands, but fascists undertook a signal attack the following month on the offices of the socialist paper *Avanti!*, with Mussolini declaring a ‘war against socialism’.<sup>10</sup> In 1921 alone, fascist squads destroyed 141 socialist centres, 197 cooperatives, 83 peasant organisations, and attacked hundreds of other labour and leftist centres of activity, leaving over a hundred people dead.<sup>11</sup> Fascist hostility to, and competition with, socialism was pivotal to the newly born ideology and movement.

Nevertheless, as indicated by ‘The Manifesto of the Italian Fasces of Combat’ of 1919 and the Nazi party’s 25-Point Programme of 1920, fascism was, especially early-on, an obscure object. Eatwell, for instance, notes the ‘mercurial’ quality of fascist ideology, which was ‘a set of syntheses’ that stretched across a number of apparently contradictory ideational poles.<sup>12</sup> He argued that fascism existed

between a conservative view of man constrained by nature and the more left-wing view of the possibilities of creating a ‘new

---

10 Blinkhorn, *Fascism and the Right in Europe*, 121.

11 Boggs, *Fascism Old and New*.

12 Roger Eatwell, ‘Fascism’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies*, ed., Michael Freedan and Mark Stears (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

man'; between a commitment to science, especially in terms of understanding human nature, and a more anti-rationalist, vitalist interest in the possibilities of will . . . ; between faith and service of Christianity and the heroism of Classical thought; between private property relations more typical of the right and a form of welfarism more typical of the left.<sup>13</sup>

More widely, across fascism between 1919 and 1945, we see extraordinary ideological variety: Christian *and* pagan; racist *and* more tolerantly, if fervently, patriotic, nationalist *and* internationalist; leaning in Romantic and in Enlightenment directions; statist *and* more market-oriented; conservative *and* Bohemian; anti-socialist *and* socialist-leaning.<sup>14</sup> As an intellectual formation, fascism was a 'panorama of discrepancies', and a 'highly unstable, non-homogenous composite.'<sup>15</sup> In addition, Italian and German fascism moved through various phases as movements, and fascism in power brought further transformations, often wildly out of sync with earlier ideological commitments and movement practices. Such discontinuous, transformative qualities are expressed in the array of interpretations of the meaning of fascism within more contemporary scholarship.<sup>16</sup> Fascism's complexity and metamorphoses were also substantially mirrored in early socialist responses.

Gramsci's journalistic treatments of the new movement, up to the

13 Roger Eatwell, R. 1992. 'Towards a New Model of Generic Fascism,' *Journal of Theoretical Politics* 4, no. 2 (1992): 189.

14 Jean-Yves Camus and Nicolas Lebourg, *Far-Right Politics in Europe* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2017); Eatwell, 'Towards a New Model'; Eatwell, 'Fascism'; Enzo Traverso, *The Origins of Nazi Violence* (New York: New Press, 2003).

15 Paolo Favilli, *The History of Italian Marxism: From its Origins to the Great War* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

16 See, for instance, Eatwell 'Towards a New Model'; Martin Kitchen, *Fascism* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1976); Zeev Sternhell, *The Birth of Fascist Ideology* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994); Emiliano Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996); Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*; Mann, *Fascists*; Paxton, *Anatomy of Fascism*; Payne, *Fascism*; Traverso, *Origins of Nazi Violence*.

fascist conquest of power in late 1922, are an important illustration of the complexity of early socialist responses to fascism. Here, Gramsci offers a wide range of often discrepant suggestions about the causes, composition, and prospects of Italian fascism.<sup>17</sup> Gramsci depicts fascism as a reactionary phase of capitalism in crisis, ‘the attempt to resolve the problems of production and exchange with machine-guns and pistol shots’.<sup>18</sup> He also noted that fascism began and was most developed in agricultural regions. For Gramsci, the threatened petty bourgeoisie provides the troops of fascism, but, also, fascism is only partly a class phenomenon. At certain moments, Gramsci underscored the centrality of violence (the Great War) in the genesis and methods of fascism, but he also emphasises psychological and cultural elements—nationalist vanity and ambitions, ‘elemental forces’.<sup>19</sup> Sometimes, fascist reaction was depicted as an international phenomenon; at other times, fascism was singularly Italian (an expression of under-development). Fascism was also contrastingly viewed as both threatening the decomposition of the state and as a restoration of the state. Furthermore, in articles just months apart (June and August 1921), Gramsci contended that fascism was becoming more homogeneous and well-organised, *and* that it was growing more fragile and poised to break in two.

Questions of capitalism and class were foregrounded in Gramsci’s analyses as is to be expected from an intellectual thinking outside the Marxist tradition in which these concerns are core features of its social cosmology, especially in the aftermath of imperialist war and amidst bitter industrial strife. The virulent anti-Leftism and street violence of Italian fascism from 1920, and the growing support for fascism offered by large landowners, capitalists, and elements within the state apparatus, made the

---

17 Antonio Gramsci, *Antonio Gramsci: Selections From Political Writings (1910–1920)* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1977); Antonio Gramsci, *Antonio Gramsci: Selections From Political Writings (1921–1926)* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1978).

18 Gramsci, *Selections From Political Writings (1921–1926)*, 23.

19 Gramsci, *Selections From Political Writings (1910–1920)*, 358.

idea of fascism as an ‘agent’ or ‘instrument’ of capitalist rule plausible.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, fascism’s mass-movement qualities suggested that it differed from other forms of reaction and was attracting other strata.<sup>21</sup> While capitalism and class were central, Gramsci and, as we will see, many other socialist thinkers also emphasised the role of the state, military factors, and broad cultural questions in their interpretations of fascism. They also tended to lay at least partial blame at the feet of competing socialist tendencies—in Gramsci’s case, the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) and trade unions. Gramsci’s analyses were, furthermore, overwhelmingly concrete, rather than abstract, and he was far from complacent about the fascist threat, suggesting in August 1921 that the choice facing Italian socialism was struggle or annihilation. I hope to demonstrate that Gramsci’s nuanced approach to fascism was not, as it is often presented, the exception that proves the rule.

Fascism’s appearance coincided with and was driven by the brutal experience of war and post-war dislocation, and, crucially, by the significant extension of socialist power. Already, in the period leading up to World War I, European socialist organisations had expanded their membership, voting share, and cultural influence, developed close ties with nationally organised and increasingly powerful trade union federations, established solid forms of transnational collaboration, and been instrumental in social and labour reforms.<sup>22</sup> The years 1917–21, though, saw a rapid and massive leftwards shift of power in Europe: governmental authority; rising shares in national electoral contests; widespread popular insurgency; new revolutionary parties; major reforms that expanded workers’ rights, welfare, and democratisation; and renewed efforts at international coordination.<sup>23</sup>

---

20 Blinkhorn, *Fascism and the Right in Europe*; Passmore, *Fascism*; Beetham, *Marxists in the Face of Fascism*; G. D. H. Cole, *A History of Socialist Thought: Volume 5: Socialism and Fascism 1931–1939* (London: Macmillan and Company Ltd, 1960).

21 Beetham, *Marxists in the Face of Fascism*.

22 Dick Geary, *European Labour Protest 1848–1939* (London: Croom Helm, 1981); Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850–2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

23 Eley, *Forging Democracy*.



At the same time, European socialism was profoundly divided over both the content of socialism and the question of how the struggle for socialism should be conducted. Such divisions, expressed at both national and transnational levels, can be traced back to conflicts within the Second International, but they were drastically deepened by World War I.<sup>24</sup> On the one hand, the socialist parties in the post-war period, having made the 'national interest' moderate socialism's hegemonic frame, tended to shed revolutionary expectations, taking a 'strictly constitutional approach to further reform', seeking to act as 'responsible' political agents, and preferring 'order' to 'endorsement of popular democratic energies'.<sup>25</sup> These parties were assailed by the newly formed communist parties linked to Bolshevik Russia. Further to the Left, sizable anarchist, syndicalist, and, later, council-communist forces challenged both the socialist reformers and communist revolutionaries. At the transnational level, in 1919 the Bolsheviks created a new Communist International (CI), and efforts were made to reassemble the Second International. The so-called 'Two-and-a-Half International' attempted to bridge the divide. In the years 1920-21, and again in 1923, all socialist parties not affiliated to the CI were gathered into a new Labour and Socialist International (LSI), allied with the Amsterdam Trade Union International.<sup>26</sup>

The diverging and conflictual conceptions of socialism and socialist strategy, as well as the competing material interests of these organisations, shaped disparate understandings of, and responses to, fascism. As Ceplair notes, faced with reaction, social democrats sought to defend democratic institutions and protect economic and social reforms; communists aimed for complete domination of working-class movements and full support for Soviet foreign policy; and unions attempted to protect their constituency from economic and political turbulence.<sup>27</sup> If moderate socialists were

---

24 Eley, *Forging Democracy*.

25 Eley, *Forging Democracy*, 227.

26 Julius Braunthal, *History of the International: 1864–1914, Volume Two* (London: Nelson, 1967).

27 Ceplair, *Under the Shadow of War*.

increasingly bound to nation, state, and capital (through the 1920s, collaborating and compromising with other parties, institutions, and social forces, and legalistic, conservative, and defensive in their approaches), the CI became ever more an ‘instrument of orthodoxy’, sectarian, rigid, and Moscow-centric.<sup>28</sup> Increasingly separate from both orthodoxies, meanwhile, more syndicalist-, anarchist-, and council-communist-leaning currents struggled for a socialism more expressive of popular insurgent energy, thereby establishing or bolstering their own mass organisations, for instance, the Communist Workers’ party (KAPD) and General Workers’ Union (AAUD) in Germany, or the Italian Syndicalist Union (USI) in Italy. Such conflicting commitments to socialism and competition for power were conditioned and exacerbated by the unfolding of intertwining military, political, economic, and ideological crises.<sup>29</sup>

Italy was the laboratory of fascism. The extreme destabilisation caused by the war and stretching into the post-war period and the diversity, strength, and radicality of its socialist traditions were crucial in this. On the eve of World War I, the PSI had 50,000 members and captured nearly a million votes; and the party first opposed but then took a neutralist position on the war.<sup>30</sup> Italy also contained thriving anarchist and syndicalist currents. Between 300,000 and half a million workers joined Italian Syndicalist Union (USI) local organisations in Italy’s two red years, 1919–20, during which 30 million days were lost to industrial disputes.<sup>31</sup> The Italian Anarchist Union’s (UAI) Bologna Congress of 1920 was composed of delegates representing dozens of groups from across the country, and its main paper, *Umanità Nova*, had a circulation exceeding 100,000.<sup>32</sup> In

---

28 Eley, *Forging Democracy*, 252.

29 Mann, *Fascists*.

30 William Z. Foster, *History of the Three Internationals* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1955).

31 B. R. Mitchell, *European Historical Statistics, 1750–1970* (London: Macmillan, 1975); Carl Levy, ‘Currents of Italian Syndicalism before 1926’ (2011), <https://libcom.org/article/currents-italian-syndicalism-1926-carl-levy>.

32 Tommy Lawson, ‘Anarchists in a Workers Uprising: Italy’s Biennio Rosso’ (2021), <https://libcom.org/article/anarchists-workers-uprising-italys-biennio-rosso>.

a break with the reformists and passive maximalists of the PSI, the Italian Communist party (PCI) was formed in January 1921, winning 290,000 votes in the May elections and a strength of 42,000 members by the end of that year.<sup>33</sup>

The PCI was one of a number of substantial communist parties founded across Europe between October 1920 and January 1921.<sup>34</sup> These parties were tied to the CI, formed in 1919, at the crest of a European wave of insurgency, and were configured by the decisive fissure between reformist and revolutionary forms of socialist organisational power. The Twenty-One Points issuing from the CI's Second Congress in 1920, characterised the moment as one of 'civil war', calling for a firm separation (including periodic 'cleansing') between revolutionaries and reformists ('social-patriots' and 'social-pacifists'), a 'war' against the Amsterdam Trade Union International, unconditional support for the Soviet Republic, and the binding authority of CI Congresses and the decisions of its executive.<sup>35</sup> Increasingly, the CI's desire to shape disorderly post-war radicalism 'narrowed and simplified the possible trajectories' of communist contestation, with its ambivalence towards popular insurgency and the mutual hostility between moderates and revolutionaries overlapping with growing European stabilisation after 1923.<sup>36</sup>

Early on, however, there was still scope for debate and a significant variety of formulation on the question of fascism, which was an important point of discussion at the Fourth Congress of the CI, held in late 1922 soon after the fascist ascension to power in Italy. There, Radek depicted fascism as a petty-bourgeois project, though one compelled to carry out capitalism's programme.<sup>37</sup> Contrastingly, the CI announced that fascism was 'primarily a weapon in the hands of the large landowners', only to describe fascism as an offensive by the capitalist class against the working class just four weeks

---

33 Pietro Basso, *The Science and Passion of Communism: Selected Writings of Amadeo Bordiga (1912–1965)* (Leiden: Brill, 2020).

34 Eley, *Forging Democracy*.

35 CI in Braunthal, *History of the International*, 539, 541.

36 Eley, *Forging Democracy*, 229.

37 Radek in Beetham, *Marxists in the Face of Fascism*.

later.<sup>38</sup> A year later, at the Enlarged Executive of the CI, the Communist Party of Germany's (KPD) Clara Zetkin delivered a subtle reading of fascism as an expression of a general and international offensive by the capitalist class, which was, nevertheless, a 'disparate formation' composed of 'broad social strata, popular masses, reaching even into the proletariat'.<sup>39</sup> Built upon material foundations—the immiseration of the working class and the distress of the middle layers—fascism, Zetkin charges, provides a 'refuge for the politically homeless, for the socially uprooted, the destitute and disillusioned'.<sup>40</sup> This imagined refuge was underpinned by the desire for a new and better community, the nation, Zetkin here anticipating later analyses of fascism's utopian dimension. Possessed of both revolutionary and reactionary elements, fascism, Zetkin argues, must be urgently combatted in every sphere by a non-sectarian, working-class united front. This strategy was endorsed at the CI's Fourth Congress, on the grounds that fascism, potentially in conflict with the established state bureaucracy and with the bourgeois political parties, was unlikely to be able to deliver on its promises and was, therefore, subject to 'internal dissolution and disintegration'.<sup>41</sup>

Despite her appeal to a united front, Zetkin's speech expressed the profound fissures within the socialist movement, connecting fascism's success to the social-democratic leaders' class collaboration and disappointment of popular hopes, as well as defending the communists against social-democratic charges that the Bolshevik Revolution had birthed fascist reaction. Far more consistent here was PCI leader Amadeo Bordiga's refusal to participate in the CI-directed common front with the PSI. In his *Rome Theses* of 1922, Bordiga had characterised fascism as an inevitable contemporary form of the dictatorship of capital, a claim suggesting that only a singular struggle against capitalism could defeat fascism.<sup>42</sup> Here, Bordiga completely rejected the PSI's call for a return to state authority and

---

38 CI in Kitchen, *Fascism*, 1.

39 Zetkin in Beetham, *Marxists in the Face of Fascism*, 110, 103.

40 Zetkin in Beetham, *Marxists in the Face of Fascism*, 106.

41 Zetkin in Beetham, *Marxists in the Face of Fascism*, 110.

42 Amadeo Bordiga, *Rome Theses* (1922), <https://www.international-communist-party.org/BasicTexts/English/22TeRome.htm>.

respect for law, and went further in positing a crucial convergence between fascism and left-bourgeois and social-democratic parties in that they all called ‘the proletariat to a *civil truce*’.<sup>43</sup> Animated by Bordiga’s contentions, a CI resolution from the Fourth Congress depicted fascism as one of the forms of counter-revolution in an epoch of capitalist decay and proletarian revolution, a form carried by a doomed petty bourgeoisie. As this decay advanced, all bourgeois parties, especially the social-democratic parties, took on a fascist character: ‘Fascism and social democracy are the two sides of a single instrument of capitalist dictatorship’.<sup>44</sup>

This controversial ‘social-fascism’ contention, which equated fascism and social democracy, is frequently treated as inexplicable and strategically ruinous to the Left’s fight against fascism. It was, though, clearly prompted by the radicals’ continuing indignation at the moderates’ submission to the patriotic consensus of the war years. Further, as Beetham notes, the post-war record of moderate socialist power further energised such rhetoric.<sup>45</sup> This record included the peace pact with the fascists signed by the PSI and the General Confederation of Labour in August 1921, together with, in Germany, the Social Democratic Party of Germany’s (SPD) deployment of counter-revolutionary Free Corps to put down the Spartacist rebellion in 1919 and the emergency powers it granted to General Seeckt in 1923 to deal with a government of communists and left social democrats in Saxony.

The strengthened national positions of the more moderate socialist parties and unions, from which they had gained the power to make reforms, had increasingly ‘constitutionalised’ these organisations, encouraging a commitment to legality, order, and established frameworks and institutions and rendering them passive, defensive, and distant from—or seeking to restrain—rank-and-file energies.<sup>46</sup> In the case of the SPD, this entailed moving against the radical Left, reassembling the forces of order, and saving

---

43 Bordiga in Basso, *Science and Passion of Communism*, 26.

44 CI in Beetham, *Marxists in the Face of Fascism*, 152.

45 Beetham, *Marxists in the Face of Fascism*.

46 Eley, *Forging Democracy*, 241.

and renewing ‘the bases of authoritarianism in the state and economy.’<sup>47</sup> The social-fascism argument made sense, then, in certain ways, as did the equation between liberal democracy and fascism, given the liberal-democratic enablement of fascist power in both Italy and Germany.

The CI’s united-front policy, which Bordiga rejected, was not, in any case, geared to genuine alliances but was viewed instead as a mechanism to draw social-democratic workers into the communist orbit.<sup>48</sup> Gramsci’s growing rift with Bordiga over this strategy in the face of a major wave of fascist repression in 1923 was of a different order, foreshadowing ideas developed in the *Prison Notebooks*. Here, we see Gramsci seeking more genuine collaboration with non-socialist intellectuals and forces, hand in hand with an effort at analysing the various strata within political organisations in order to assess the possibilities for recruiting for the anti-fascist struggle and engaging in fine-grained reconnaissance of the contradictions and tensions that might help weaken fascism.<sup>49</sup> In the final break between Bordiga and Gramsci at the PCI’s Lyons Congress in January 1926, Gramsci and Togliatti’s theses placed an intriguing emphasis on fascism as auguring a new stage of capitalism.<sup>50</sup> An important part of Bordiga’s intervention, meanwhile, was motivated by his growing opposition to the increasingly coercive Bolshevisation of the CI, Bordiga in the same year presenting a lone critique to the CI’s Executive Committee of the organisation’s degeneration and its methods of ‘threats and terror’.

As noted, Italy was also home to vigorous anarchist currents, which opposed both the moderation and passivity of the PSI and the authoritarian and centralising tendencies of the international communist movement. Italian anarchist intellectuals were to become important mediators within the global anti-fascist movement, and one of the exceptional and neglected

---

47 Eley, *Forging Democracy*, 169. See also A. J. Ryder, *The German Revolution of 1981: A Study of German Socialism in War and Revolt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967).

48 Cole, *History of Socialist Thought*.

49 Jean-Yves Fretigne, *To Live is to Resist: The Life of Antonio Gramsci* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022).

50 Gramsci, *Selections from Political Writings* (1921–1926).

contributions to socialist analyses of fascism appeared from within this tradition: Luigi Fabbri's 1921 *Preventative Counter-Revolution*.<sup>51</sup> A teacher and close collaborator of fellow Anarchist Union member and grand figure of Italian anarchism Errico Malatesta, Fabbri in this essay is wide-ranging, differentiated, and thoughtful. Discussing the uneven and contradictory temporal and regional development of fascism in significant detail, Fabbri views fascist contradictions as both a source of strength, as in fascism's appeal to various constituencies, and as a threat to the movement, potentially opening a divide between leaders and masses. Unconstrained by more rigid Marxian class analyses, Fabbri also provides novel observations about fascism's 'broad coalescence of interests', with fascism drawing in a range of fearful and angry classes, sub-classes, and categories. These include backward-looking strata, parasitic castes attached to the state or looking to benefit from 'the bounty of the state', the petty bourgeoisie, and elements within the working class, some drawn in by fascist use of the language of syndicalism. While Fabbri still decisively connects fascism to the defensive needs of the ruling classes, he suggests that fascism might end up undermining ruling-class interests and points to the tensions between fascism and the bourgeois state, which may end up swallowing fascism. In addition, Fabbri characterises fascism as 'the most natural and legitimate product of war', representing a continuation of the Great War at the national level. And in what was to become a staple theme of later far-Left analyses, he contends that 'Fascism is one branch sprouting from the great state-capitalist trunk', a state capitalism that is also characteristic of the new order in Russia. Finally, Fabbri searchingly reflects on the strategic lessons that socialists might draw from fascism—most daringly, perhaps, the need to reconsider the blanket socialist disavowal of nationalist appeals.

As these analyses were being developed, Italian socialism was under attack from the fascist state. The year 1926 was a fateful one as a massive wave of repression saw both Bordiga and Gramsci imprisoned, along with a

---

51 Federico Ferretti, 'Transnational Anarchism Against Fascism: Subaltern Geopolitics and Spaces of Exile in Camillo Berneri's Work', in *Anti-Fascism in a Global Perspective*; Luigi Fabbri, 'Preventative Counter-Revolution' (1921), <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/luigi-fabbri-the-preventive-counter-revolution>.

third of the PCI's active members, the party losing 10,000 members in that year.<sup>52</sup> Released from prison, Bordiga, under police surveillance, withdrew from political activity until 1944. Gramsci, now head of the PCI, remained confined to prison until his death in 1937, though this imposed detachment from political activity allowed him to develop his reflections on fascism in the *Prison Notebooks*, free of the constraints of an increasingly doctrinaire CI. The PSI was banned in 1926, as were Italy's anarchist organisations, whose militants were imprisoned in their thousands. After refusing to swear an oath of loyalty to the fascist regime and losing his teaching post, Fabbri fled Italy, continuing his anti-fascist activities first in Europe then in South America.<sup>53</sup>

If, from 1919, Bolshevik Russia was now a crucial hub and pole of attraction for world socialism and Italy a major centre of both socialist power and a laboratory for fascism, Germany remained a significant site of socialist influence and a repository of socialist hopes. Rocked by military defeat and by working-class unrest and socialist militancy in the immediate post-war years, Germany boasted the world's most powerful social-democratic party, one which became a pillar of the new Weimar Republic. Meanwhile, the KPD, the first mass-based communist party outside the USSR, had attracted 2.7 million votes by 1924, drawing a younger, more precariously employed, and more radical fraction of the German working class.<sup>54</sup> To the left of the KPD, mass organisations animated by syndicalist and councilist ideas such as the KAPD, the AAUD, and the Free Workers' Union of Germany (FAUD) offered significant challenges to both the SPD and KPD.

In the Weimar period, as noted, the SPD sought to protect the significant gains it had played an important role in achieving, becoming more deeply

---

52 Basso, *Science and Passion of Communism*; Fretigne, *To Live is to Resist*.

53 Francesco Lamendola, 'Remembering Luigi Fabbri' (1988), <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/francesco-lamendola-remembering-luigi-fabbri>.

54 David E. Barclay and Eric D. Weitz, 'Introduction', in *Between Reform and Revolution: German Socialism and Communism from 1840 to 1990*, eds., David E. Barclay and Eric D. Weitz (New York: Berghahn Books, 1998); Geary, *European Labour Protest*.



bound up within the new parliamentary regime, more cautious and defensive, and more inclined towards accommodation with other forces.<sup>55</sup> Compromised by its capitulation during the war, the SPD's reputation suffered further damage as it engaged in repression of left radicalism and, later, toleration of conservative and reactionary governments.<sup>56</sup> Socialist critique of the SPD was manifested in the formation first of the Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany (USPD), and then of the KPD, which increasingly supported almost any effort of social disruption.<sup>57</sup> As Weitz notes: 'Nowhere else in Europe did a mass-based communist party face a mass-based social democratic party integrally identified with the state, which gave the communist-social democratic split a special virulence in Germany'.<sup>58</sup> Already in 1923, the KPD was charging the SPD with responsibility for handing power to fascism, calling for a life-or-death struggle against the leaders of social democracy.<sup>59</sup> This hostility flowed in both directions, with social-democratic leaders demonising Bolshevism, Kautsky warning, in 1927, that revolutionary adventurism was likely to foment fascism, as it had in Italy.<sup>60</sup>

This established and virulent separation became more deeply entrenched in 1928-1935 with the CI's "third-period" turn. This turn confined the KDP to the straightjacket of Stalinism—coinciding with the Great Depression and a sharp rise in Nazi support from 2.6 to 37.3 per cent of the vote between 1928 and 1932, configuring the party as an ever more intransigent and authoritarian force and reducing the likelihood of other intellectual and

---

55 Barclay and Weitz, 'Introduction'; Eley, *Forging Democracy*; Eric D. Weitz, 'Communism and the Public Spheres of Weimar Germany', in *Between Reform and Revolution*.

56 Beetham, *Marxists in the Face of Fascism*; Braunthal, *History of the International*.

57 Weitz, 'Communism and the Public Spheres of Weimar Germany'.

58 Weitz, 'Communism and the Public Spheres of Weimar Germany', 278.

59 KPD in Beetham, *Marxists in the Face of Fascism*.

60 Eley, *Forging Democracy*; Kautsky in Beetham, *Marxists in the Face of Fascism*.

political possibilities.<sup>61</sup> In the CI's 1929 formulation, the second period of stabilisation which had followed the revolutionary upheavals of 1917-1921 had, in turn, given way to an 'objectively revolutionary' third moment.<sup>62</sup> In this revolutionary period, the CI contended, fascism, understood as direct capitalist-class power, would increasingly assume the form of 'social-fascism' within nations in which social-democratic forces were strong. Overestimating 'Hitler-fascism' as against other fascist forms was, then, a crucial mistake. A major focus for communist action as expressed by KPD leader Ernst Thalmann was to combat social democracy, 'the most active factor in the process of fascistisation', to seek through united-front activity to split and draw workers away from the SPD and the trade unions.<sup>63</sup> Such increasingly centrally devised and abstract analyses continued to issue from the CI and KPD, even after the surge of support for the Nazis in 1932.<sup>64</sup> The perverse effects of this engagement are captured in the KPD's Wilhelm Pieck's declaration at the Thirteenth Plenum of the CI's Executive Committee in December 1933, following the destruction of the German socialist movement, that Nazi power was weakening, communist influence rising, and a coming revolutionary wave was on the immediate horizon.<sup>65</sup>

Intellectuals within the SPD were similarly engaged within tightly circumscribed ideological and political frameworks, shaped by the desire to protect and extend their organisational power. In the early 1930s, Hilferding insisted on the need to 'hold the parliamentary ground intact' against both fascists and the Left, calling for an uncompromising struggle against the

---

61 Beetham, *Marxists in the Face of Fascism*; Eley, *Forging Democracy*; Beatrix Herlemann, 'Communist Resistance Between Comintern Directives and Nazi Terror', in *Between Reform and Revolution*; Weitz, 'Communism and the Public Spheres of Weimar Germany'.

62 CI in Beetham, *Marxists in the Face of Fascism*.

63 Thalmann in Beetham, *Marxists in the Face of Fascism*, 165; Cole, *History of Socialist Thought*; Duncan Hallas, *The Comintern. A History of the Third International* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2008); Kitchen, *Fascism*.

64 Beetham, *Marxists in the Face of Fascism*.

65 Herlemann, 'Communist Resistance between Comintern Directives and Nazi Terror'.

communists.<sup>66</sup> The party frequently viewed the KPD as an even larger threat than the Nazis (at times, viewing fascism as a temporary aberration to normal capitalist development), with the SPD ‘tolerating’ repressive regimes, conceding to emergency measures and the dismantling of social legislation, and even supporting Hindenberg, symbol of monarchical and militaristic Germany, out of fear of something worse.<sup>67</sup> A brief and halting, more militant ‘Iron Front’ strategy gave way to continuing passivity, until, in a final, futile attempt to save the Party at any cost, 48 of 65 SPD members present in the Reichstag voted for a declaration of peace with Hitler in May 1933.<sup>68</sup> By June of the same year, German socialism was buried—both parties were banned and their property and finances confiscated.

---

By 1933, two formerly powerful socialist movements in Italy and Germany had been shattered by fascism. Scholarly commentators have been consistently and strongly critical of both the moderate socialists and the communists for their ineffectiveness, sectarianism, and underestimation of fascism. This judgement is, in certain ways, inescapable. Yet, it also minimises the degree to which intellectuals within these parties expressed the material and ideal interests of the organisations to which they belonged and which engaged their analyses and responses to fascism. These intellectual maps and political strategies, viewed from within these organisational situations, were plausible, and the interpretations of fascism contain rich and compelling material.

In this section, I turn to consider the ways in which these socialist defeats brought important transformations in socialist interpretations of fascism. On the one hand, the fascist destruction of socialism in Italy and Germany demolished the approaches to fascism characteristic of the

---

66 Hilferding in Beetham, *Marxists in the Face of Fascism*, 258.

67 Beetham, *Marxists in the Face of Fascism*; Braunthal, *History of the International*; David F. Crew, ‘A Social Republic? Social Democrats, Communists, and the Weimar Welfare State, 1919 to 1933’, in *Between Reform and Revolution*.

68 Braunthal, *History of the International*; Crew, ‘A Social Republic?’.

two predominant poles of socialist power in Europe. In his analysis of the social democratic side of this polarity, Horn contends that the fascist defeat of socialism by 1933 produced a vacuum in which the dissolution of organisational and ideological verities proved to be a moment of ‘Maximum choice’, contingency, and opportunity.<sup>69</sup> As a result, sudden shifts in political behaviour occurred, most notably, a rapprochement among various organisations across the European Left, including a significant radicalisation of elements of social democracy and a moderation of CI policy positions. On the other hand, the more free-floating situation of socialist thinkers outside the orbits of the major spheres of organised socialism, especially among those on the far-Left, provided the space in which a number of significant new analyses of fascism were developed.

Founded in Hamburg, the Labour and Socialist International (LSI) was a much larger organisation than the CI, with a membership four times higher (though the CI’s income was 26 times greater than that of the LSI) and composed of far more electorally successful mass parties.<sup>70</sup> The organisation’s platform was decidedly moderate and elite-driven, committed to a broad agenda that converged in important ways with liberalism: careful reform, democracy, a peaceful international order.<sup>71</sup> As Horn notes, though, the victory of fascism shocked a number of the LSI’s constituent parties into reconsideration.<sup>72</sup> In 1933, the LSI called for an end to the hostility between the Internationals in the face of the threat posed to democracy and peace by the ‘terrorist despotism’ of fascism, a fascism whose root cause was capitalism.<sup>73</sup> Even though the LSI would continue to be immobile and decidedly reluctant in its dealings with the CI, a radicalisation was evident within social democratic ranks, especially

---

69 Gerd-Rainer Horn, *European Socialists Respond to Fascism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 11.

70 Braunthal, *History of the International*.

71 Daniel Laqua, D., ‘Democratic Politics and the League of Nations: The Labour and Socialist International as a Protagonist of Interwar Internationalism’, *Contemporary European History* 24, no. 2 (2015): 175–192.

72 Horn, *European Socialists Respond to Fascism*.

73 Braunthal, *History of the International*.

among the LSI's 'Group of Seven'.<sup>74</sup> In 1933, still critical of Bolshevik methods, Kautsky accepted the need for illegality and undemocratic means in the struggle against fascism, and a more militant Alexander Schiffrin insisted on the invalidation of the SPD's methods between 1914 and 1933 in favour of a return to the revolutionary Marxist tradition.<sup>75</sup> Smuggled into Germany disguised as a guide to self-shaving, the SPD's 1934 *Prague Manifesto* resonated with Leninist rhetoric: critical of the party's prior failure to transform the state apparatus, insistent on the necessity of a revolutionary seizure of state power by all means, and lending a lead role in this struggle to an 'elite of revolutionaries'.<sup>76</sup>

At the same time as elements within the LSI were radicalising, the new world situation and growing fears for the security of the Soviet state shaped a significant deflation of revolutionary rhetoric and a moderation of policy within the CI. In process since 1933, this moderation is captured in Georgi Dimitrov's report at the Seventh World Congress of the CI, in August 1935, in which fascism is defined as 'the open, terroristic dictatorship of the most reactionary, most chauvinist and most imperialist elements of finance capital'.<sup>77</sup> A decisive break from the 'Third Period' strategy, Dimitrov's report insisted on the distinction between bourgeois democracy and fascism, and the new definition, by associating fascism with one particular fraction of capital, suggested the formation of a much broader, more open anti-fascist coalition.<sup>78</sup> Still critical of the social-democratic parties, but also acknowledging CI errors, Dimitrov called for an unconditional united front of workers, irrespective of party, and for a wide 'anti-fascist People's Front' that would reach beyond the working class, even towards

---

74 Horn, *European Socialists Respond to Fascism*.

75 Schiffrin in Beetham, *Marxists in the Face of Fascism*.

76 SPD, 'Prague Manifesto: Basic Program of the SPD' (1934), [https://www.harte-zeiten.de/dokument\\_396.html](https://www.harte-zeiten.de/dokument_396.html).

77 Georgi Dimitrov, 'The Fascist Offensive and the Tasks of the Communist international in the Struggle of the Working Class against Fascism' (1935), [https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/dimitrov/works/1935/08\\_02.htm](https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/dimitrov/works/1935/08_02.htm).

78 John M. Cammett, 'Communist Theories of Fascism, 1920-1935', *Science and Society* 31, no. 2 (1967): 149-163.

organisations with bourgeois leaderships.

This move to reconciliation had already begun in France in 1934 with the French Communist party (PCF) declaring in the spring of that year that fascism was now the ‘chief danger’.<sup>79</sup> The Popular Front turn—along with Soviet attempts to court less hostile relations with the larger Western powers—was a ‘huge departure’ for the CI, one connected to legitimate fears for the security of ‘the great fatherland’ of world socialism.<sup>80</sup> Continuous with the increasing priority given within the CI to building socialism in Russia and to Soviet state-policy requirements, it also represented, as Eley notes, both a first revision of the revolutionary optimism of communist rhetoric and a questioning of the Bolshevik model, pushed since the CI’s formation.<sup>81</sup> It suggested a more gradualist and alliance-based politics, seeking to claim for communist parties the ‘mantle of a nation’s best democratic traditions’—socialism—framed by Dimitrov, as ‘the salvation of the nation’.<sup>82</sup>

That turn also crucially confused the major socialist differences cemented in the period 1917-1921. While briefly successful in opening the way to Popular Front governments in France and Spain, and in broadening the communist appeal (the PCF, for instance, growing its membership from 40,000 to 330,000 between 1934 and 1937), this path was abruptly abandoned in the face of Nazi expansion, mutual suspicion between the Soviet Union and Britain and France, and Stalin’s justified fears that the latter would encourage or be satisfied with Hitler’s eastward advance.<sup>83</sup> Instead, the Soviet leadership sought to buy time with the infamous German-Soviet non-aggression pact of 1939, a turn that significantly dislocated the anti-fascist movement.<sup>84</sup>

These dramatic political and strategic reversals within the two dominant

---

79 PCF in Beetham, *Marxists in the Face of Fascism*, 172.

80 Eley, *Forging Democracy*, 266; Dimitrov, ‘The Fascist Offensive’.

81 Eley, *Forging Democracy*.

82 Eley, *Forging Democracy*, 266.

83 Eley, *Forging Democracy*.

84 Braunthal, *History of the International*; Cole, *History of Socialist Thought*; Eley, *Forging Democracy*.

camps of socialist power were accompanied by important ideational shifts: for instance, Dimitrov's narrowing of the class basis and function of fascism or Bauer's theorisation of fascism as a 'bureaucratically directed monopoly capitalism', a war economy and imperialism characteristic of the 'dissatisfied powers'.<sup>85</sup> However, for the most part, more daring rethinkings were to be found outside of the mass organisational constraints of social democracy or CI-sponsored communism.

One new interpretative line drew on Marx's work on Bonapartism and was charted by three intellectuals cut adrift in different ways from the CI. August Thalheimer was ejected from the KPD in 1929, the same year Trotsky was expelled from the Soviet Union, and both thinkers deployed the concept of Bonapartism to contest CI policy and suggest more subtle analyses of fascism's distinctiveness. This distinctiveness, for Thalheimer, lay in the shift from competitive to monopoly capitalism and in new mass organisational forms which were developed as a counter to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.<sup>86</sup> Trotsky, meanwhile, drew a distinction between 'preventative' Bonapartism, which attempted to contain the fascist threat while using fascism, and a 'Bonapartism of fascist origin'.<sup>87</sup> Also drawing from Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire* and, for different reasons, at a distance from the reigning CI orthodoxy, Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* develop and test a constellation of concepts—historic bloc, passive revolution, organic crisis, transformism—which were importantly directed towards a better understanding of fascism.<sup>88</sup> Here, fascism, analysed both as Caesarism and Bonapartism, arises in a situation of 'deadly equilibrium', Gramsci notably underscoring the relative independence of political and ideological dimensions as well as fascism's connection with a wider, epochal shift

---

85 Bauer, 1938 in Beetham, *Marxists in the Face of Fascism*, 344, 347.

86 August Thalheimer, 'On Fascism' (1930), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/thalheimer/works/fascism.htm>; Thalheimer, 1932, in Beetham, *Marxists in the Face of Fascism*.

87 Leon Trotsky, 'Bonapartism and Fascism' (1934), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/germany/1934/340715.htm>

88 Michele Filippini, *Using Gramsci: A New Approach* (London: Pluto Press, 2017).

towards massification, planning, and organisation.<sup>89</sup>

Gramsci's more daring reconsiderations, especially his emphasis on political and ideological spheres and his periodising contentions, were mirrored by a range of socialist thinkers who, for different reasons, were placed outside the substantial socialist organisational contexts and whose diagnoses emerged more directly from anarchist, syndicalist, and councilist traditions. From within the anarchist current, for instance, Camillo Berneri, a leading figure in both the UAI and USI, emphasised the racist and anti-Semitic aspect of fascism, which he viewed as a conversion of class into race privilege and as a central binding myth.<sup>90</sup> Such a focus was, as Traverso points out, surprisingly absent from mainline socialist analyses, with both the KPD and SPD, at best, treating Nazi anti-Semitism as an epiphenomenon or archaism.<sup>91</sup> In the same year, Russian anarchist Voline similarly drew particular attention to the importance of the ideological dimension of fascism, in particular, the poisonous idea that the masses must be led by an elite minority.<sup>92</sup> Such 'deep-rooted, far-reaching historical foundations' accounted for fascism's transnational expansion, which included the 'red fascism' of the Soviet Union, and this fascist spread signalled an epochal shift in economy and state towards a newly dominant state capitalism.<sup>93</sup>

The suggestion that fascism be understood as part of a wider process of state-capitalist convergence is characteristic, too, of council-communist

---

89 Antonini, Francesca *Caesarism and Bonapartism in Gramsci: Hegemony and the Crisis of Modernity* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 111; Fretigne, *To Live is to Resist*; Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks, Volumes I-III* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2007).

90 Ferretti, 'Transnational Anarchism Against Fascism'; Camillo Berneri, 'Against the Racist Delirium' (1934), <https://libcom.org/article/against-racist-delirium-camillo-berneri>

91 Enzo Traverso, *The Jewish Question: History of a Marxist Debate* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2018).

92 Voline, 'Red Fascism' (1934), <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/voline-red-fascism>.

93 For similar arguments, see also Max Nomad, 'The Other Face of Fascism,' *Vanguard: A Libertarian Communist Journal* 3, no. 5 (1936): 5–6; and Rudolf Rocker, *Nationalism and Culture* (Los Angeles: Rocker Publication Committee, 1936).



interpretations of fascism. The origins of this tradition can be traced to the events in Russia in 1905, the syndicalist mood that swept through Europe from about the same point, Luxemburg's and Pannekoek's critiques of Kautskyian centrism, and the explosion of workers' councils from 1917. Critiquing socialist reformism and trade unionism, this German-Dutch Left instead emphasised spontaneous mass action and organisation as core to revolutionary struggle and the post-revolutionary 'administration of things'.<sup>94</sup> The KAPD was founded in April 1920 with 38,000 members in a split with the KPD centred on the question of parliamentary action.<sup>95</sup> After Lenin's attack on 'Left-Wing' communism, the KAPD were excluded from the CI in 1921 due to their resistance to Bolshevisation and growing criticism of the new Soviet state. By 1923, the KAPD viewed the Russian Revolution as dual, both bourgeois and proletarian, and, eventually, this Left concluded that the character of the USSR was state-capitalist.<sup>96</sup> The AAUD, modelled somewhat on the American Industrial Workers of the World, a breakaway AAUD-E (which completely rejected outside political leadership of working-class struggle), and the syndicalist FAUD similarly became mass organisations, the AAUD and FAUD together reaching a highwater mark of up to 325,000 members in the early 1920s.<sup>97</sup> As the insurgent wave of the post-war period ebbed, however, these forces were quickly fragmented and scattered. They lacked the institutional solidity, organisational and ideological unity, and material resources of the SPD or KPD, and they were possessed of strong tendencies to reject any trends towards bureaucratisation and any privileging of leaders over masses. Between 1922 and the end of 1923, FAUD membership fell by half and,

---

94 Philippe Bourrinet, *The Dutch and German Communist Left (1900–68): 'Neither Lenin nor Trotsky nor Stalin!'—'All Workers Must Think for Themselves'* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

95 Marcel Van Der Linden, 'On Council Communism,' *Historical Materialism* 12, no. 4 (2004): 27–50.

96 Bourrinet, *The Dutch and German Communist Left*.

97 John Gerber, *Anton Pannekoek and the Socialism of Workers-Self-Emancipation 1873–1960* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989); Gary Roth, *Marxism in a Lost Century: A Biography of Paul Mattick* (Leiden: Brill, 2014).

by the close of 1924, the KAPD and AAUD combined had as few as 2,700 members.<sup>98</sup> Similarly, attempts at international organisation with the Communist Workers' International (KAI) proved a dismal failure. And yet, the depletion and dis-organisation of this current as an effective political force had the effect of setting some of its intellectuals free from the constraints operative in both social-democratic and communist organisations, providing the space, in isolation and exile, for novel analyses of fascism in the 1930s.

Council-communist analyses were not uniform, as they were undertaken by small groups—the Group of International Communists (GIC) in the Netherlands, for example, consisting of around 10 militants—and networks of otherwise quite isolated intellectuals.<sup>99</sup> Thus, councilists variously suggested that fascism was a sign of capitalism's 'terminal decline', a direct response to the threat of the working class, or a reaction to an 'emergency' situation of capitalist crisis. They differed, too, in their assessment of the class forces that animated fascism, with all noting the central role of the petty bourgeoisie, but Guerin also viewing fascism as 'the instrument of heavy industry'.<sup>100</sup> Similarly, council communists took various positions on the stability or not of fascist regimes, with Korsch's pessimism against Guerin's emphasis on the tensions between fascist regimes and capitalist interests and on the fascist failure to achieve its totalitarian aims. Centrally, for the council communists, fascism meant a reconfiguration of state and economy and their interrelationship, framed, most significantly, as a shift from private to state capitalism.<sup>101</sup> This analysis also typically remarked upon convergences between fascism and social democracy, but especially

---

98 Roth, *Marxism in a Lost Century*; Van Der Linden, 'On Council Communism'.

99 Bourrinet, *The Dutch and German Communist Left*.

100 Daniel Guerin, 'Fascism and Socialism' (1945), <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/guerin/1945/09/fascism.htm>

101 Karl Korsch, 'Theses toward a Critique of Fascism' (1932), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/korsch/1932/theses-fascist-state.htm>; Anton Pannekoek [as J. Harper], 'The Role of Fascism,' *International Council Correspondence* 2, no. 8 (1936): 10–16; Otto Ruhle, 'Which Side to Take?', *Living Marxism* 5, no. 2 (1940): 14–18.

emphasised the parallels between the fascist and Soviet social orders, Ruhle contending that ‘Fascism is merely a copy of Bolshevism’.<sup>102</sup>

Alongside these more economy- and state-centred explanatory and diagnostic emphases, the council-communist thinkers offered a number of intriguing interpretative suggestions based on realms beyond political economy. Thus, Pannekoek argued that fascism was, in part, an expression of an escalating ‘spirit of violence, located, crucially, in European expansion into the non-European world.’<sup>103</sup> Novel considerations on the importance of ideological factors are also suggested by these thinkers: Guerin on the mythological and utopian significance of fascist corporatism; Pannekoek on the role a ‘spiritual’, increasingly generalised ‘Leader principle’ has played in fascist success; Korsch on the fatalistic and pessimistic conception of history operative in Nazi ideology.<sup>104</sup>

More thoroughgoing attention to ideological factors is to be found among the thinkers associated with the Frankfurt School. Many of these figures had been decisively formed by far-left, particularly councilist, ideas, and links existed between Korsch and Mattick and exiled members of the school in the US.<sup>105</sup> The Frankfurt thinkers put forward arguments congruent with the councilists about the decline of liberal capitalism and the arrival of a new state capitalism connected to the primacy of politics, concentration,

---

102 Karl Korsch, ‘The Fascist Counter-Revolution’ (1940), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/korsch/1940/fascist-counterrevolution.htm>; Paul Mattick, ‘World-wide Fascism or World Revolution?’ (1934), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/mattick-paul/1934/fascism-revolution.htm>; Anton Pannekoek, *Workers’ Councils* (1950), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/pannekoek/1947/workers-councils.htm>; Otto Ruhle, ‘The Struggle Against Fascism Begins with the Struggle Against Bolshevism,’ *International Council Correspondence* 4, no. 8 (1939): 245–255.

103 Pannekoek, *Workers’ Councils*; see also Karl Korsch, ‘Notes on History: The Ambiguities of Totalitarian Ideologies,’ *New Essays* 6, no. 2 (1942): 1–9.

104 Daniel Guerin, ‘Fascist Corporatism,’ *Council Correspondence* 3, no. 2 (1937): 14–24; Pannekoek, *Workers’ Councils*; Korsch, ‘Notes on History’.

105 See, for instance Max Horkheimer, ‘The Authoritarian State,’ *Telos* 15 (1973 [1940]): 3–20.

planning, and command and to a newly composed ruling class.<sup>106</sup> Though more hesitant than the councilists, they also developed critiques of social democracy and Soviet communism.<sup>107</sup> These arguments tended to be more tightly fused and balanced, though, with broadly cultural considerations on fascism: for instance, the effects of the attempted collapse of the walls between private and public life; the impact of the drive for rationalisation and the demise of reason; the shattering of individuality; and the role of irrationalistic naturalism, sacrifice, and heroism in fascist ideology and the connections and disconnections between this and liberalism.<sup>108</sup>

At times, such treatments of the broadly cultural dimension of fascism were accorded substantial independent efficacy, as in the works of Reich and Bloch. In *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, for instance, Reich extended in new directions the earlier Frankfurt School concerns with authoritarianism and family life.<sup>109</sup> Here, against ‘vulgar’ Marxian orthodoxy (both conservative social democracy and totalitarian Soviet state capitalism), Reich’s character-analytical psychology emphasised the importance of the authoritarian family in fascism’s success. For Reich, the family’s suppression of ‘natural gratification’ left people susceptible to fascism’s ‘substitute gratifications’, sadism, mysticism, and irrationalism, and made them more likely to identify with a ‘Führer’ figure.

In a very different register, Bloch’s *The Heritage of Our Times* explored fascism’s utopian significance. Bloch depicted fascism as a ‘powerful cultural

---

106 Max Horkheimer, ‘The Jews and Europe’ (1938), <https://thecharnelhouse.org/2015/03/20/the-jews-and-europe/>; Horkheimer, ‘The Authoritarian State’; Friedrich Pollock, ‘Is National Socialism a New Order?’, *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 9, no. 3 (1941): 440–455.

107 For instance, Horkheimer, ‘The Authoritarian State’.

108 Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research 1923-1950* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1973); Douglas Kellner, ed., *Herbert Marcuse: Technology, War and Fascism: Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse, Volume One* (London: Routledge, 1998); Pollock, ‘Is National Socialism a New Order?’; Horkheimer, ‘The Jews and Europe’; Horkheimer, ‘The Authoritarian State’; Herbert Marcuse, *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory* (London: MayFly Books, 2009).

109 Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1970); Jay, *Dialectical Imagination*.

synthesis' that drew from 'the future in the past', rejecting the standard Marxian denunciation of fascist ideology as false, irrational, nihilistic, or as simply a tool of big business.<sup>110</sup> Fascism expressed an authentic longing for something different and responding to modern disenchantment by joining a romantic anti-capitalism (roots, soil, homeland) among rural strata with fears of decline and genuine immiseration among middling urban strata and a youth out of step with 'the barren Now'.<sup>111</sup> In expressing this longing, fascism had successfully stolen elements from the Left. It had also created 'new figures', synthesising various elements—fairy tales, Christianity, myth, kitsch, Romanticism, occultism and magic, 'masculine qualities' (strength, openness, decency, purity), a primitive 'participation mystique', and components from vitalist philosophy (will, life, creation, instinct)—into a compelling imaginative ensemble.<sup>112</sup>

The quite singular contributions of Reich and Bloch are expressive of the significant shifts in socialist responses to fascism in this period. One observation of these transformations in socialist knowledge is that, in their various ways, they express a faltering of socialist optimism conditioned by the defeats of the period 1926-1933. Various, several of these mobilising articles of socialist faith had been shaken, such as faith in the evolution of capitalism into socialism, the unbreakable power of socialist organisation, the inevitability of world revolution, uncontrollable capitalist contradictions, approaching capitalist collapse, the unstoppable formation of mass, communist consciousness, and spontaneous and self-organising revolutionary action. Socialists, conditioned by the environments they operated in, responded by producing new forms of knowledge and seeking political realignment.

---

110 Bloch in Anson Rabinbach, 'Unclaimed Heritage: Ernst Bloch's *Heritage of our times* and the Theory of Fascism,' *New German Critique* 11 (Spring 1977): 5, 7.

111 Bloch, 'Nonsynchronism and the Obligation to its Dialectics', 23.

112 Ernst Bloch, *The Heritage of our Times* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991 [1935]); Bloch, 'Nonsynchronism and the Obligation to its Dialectics'.

I have sought to demonstrate that that the story of socialist interpretations of fascism is a rich and complex one. Socialist intellectuals attempted to understand fascism by focusing on a range of analytical factors: the connection between fascism and transformations in state and economy, as well as their changing interlinkages; the groups attracted to and the interests served by fascism; the part played by socialism in fascist success; the role of violence, warfare, and imperialism in fascism; and the ideological, utopian, and psychological dimensions of fascism. And they did so in a range of ways.

A full and balanced account of these considerations, though, is not to be found in any of the thinkers considered above. The reasons for this, I believe, are illuminated by a sociology-of-knowledge approach. These intellectuals were not detached observers of fascism but, rather and above all else, passionate socialist militants, operating within environments that both enabled and constrained their analyses. Their belonging to or detachment from socialist organisations, organisations with particular interests, operating in particular situations, in competition with other forces, conditioned the knowledge that they produced about fascism and the strategies they offered to combat it. Here, dynamics of engagement and relative free-floatingness visibly impacted on socialist knowledge production. Belonging to strong, disciplined socialist organisations offered possibilities, for instance, in the way in which, for all of its destructive sectarianism and authoritarianism, CI control and coordination enabled communist forces to flourish in the period of Resistance movements.<sup>113</sup> This belonging, of course, equally entailed constraints, which could arise in ideas and decisions that were self-defeating. Conversely, while detachment from organisations, such as that experienced by Gramsci, the council communists, or the Frankfurt School thinkers, could have a freeing effect on knowledge production, it came at a cost to political efficacy.

Gathered together, though, this socialist variety still offers us inspiration and important resources and prompts for thinking about the contemporary far-Right. Today's far-Right is an obscure object, just as fascism was for

---

113 Eley, *Forging Democracy*.

socialists in the interwar period, variously Christian, atheist, and pagan, violent and parliamentary, nationalist and civilisational, fear- and hate-laden and utopian, individualist and communitarian, traditionalist and accelerationist, statist and libertarian, liberal and anti-liberal, progressivist and declinist. The abundant scholarship on the far-Right that has appeared over the last decade is full of insight, subtlety, and emancipatory intent. Yet, it seldom seems to build integrated accounts, comparable in scope and depth to the combined work of the interwar socialists surveyed above.

Of course, the situation of left knowledge production today is very different from that of interwar Europe. Socialism emerged from the Great War as a powerful, though divided, set of forces: unions, mass parties, governments, cultural organisations, encompassing, persuasive ideologies, and international institutions. These forces were the most important players in the analysis of and fight against fascism. Today, such forces, in the West at least, are either profoundly diminished or entirely buried. In the absence of such forces, the analysis of and fight against the far-Right are unlikely to rival the record of interwar European socialism.

The task of reimagining and rebuilding socialist organisational forms is key, then, to countering the far-Right. Here, interwar socialism offers us strategic lessons and warnings. Crucially, too, the combined intellectual work of interwar socialism could provide the foundations of a multidimensional research programme. Such a programme might inspire concrete, theoretically- and data-rich treatments of the contemporary far-Right's composition, temporal and spatial development, and connectedness to changes, dislocations, and interconnections in economy and politics. It would encourage the balancing of these concerns with attention to the far-Right's ideological patterns, utopian figures, psychological appeals and new types of subjecthood, imaginaries and practices of violence, sex and race significations, and reactions against and borrowings from the Left. Despite everything, the glow of the historic socialist-led anti-fascist struggle continues to illuminate better paths into the future.