Political Gangsters and Nazism: Some Comments on Richard Hamilton’s Theory of Fascism.

A Review Article

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Recent scholarship on fascism has generated an impressive array of studies on the social basis of modern Europe’s most destructive and dangerous political movement. These works have argued that older theories explaining the causes and outcomes of fascist movements and regimes were inadequate because they lacked close empirical analysis of the people who supported fascism.\(^1\) In historical research on Nazism this general critique articulated with a growing attack on scholarly preoccupation with state administration, national elites, major special interest groups, and foreign policy.\(^2\) Predictably, such useful and justifiable responses to the lack of social analysis in the study of European and German fascism have produced a number of problems. Whereas theorizations of the 1950s and 1960s were based on thin empirical foundations, new social scientific research, by stressing largely quantifiable issues in the history

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of fascism, has eschewed the useful theoretical impulse of that earlier work.3 Because Richard Hamilton’s innovative study of the Nazi electorate not only relies heavily on quantitative evidence but also outlines an alternative theory of fascism, *Who Voted for Hitler?*4 contains a synthetic element missing in most recent work. Understandably, Hamilton’s book has gained its widest hearing among specialists of modern German social and political history.5 It is useful, therefore, to draw critical attention to the book’s impact on a wider discourse in the social history and theory of European fascism.

Hamilton begins with a detailed quantitative exploration of the Nazi urban electorate, a group requiring more systematic attention after decades of concentration on the rural and smalltown foundations of the NSDAP (*Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei*) vote. The empirical core of the study is an analysis of the July, 1932, Reichstag elections, when the NSDAP gained its highest vote totals under relatively free political conditions. By discussing the correlation between the occupational structures of urban electoral districts and the Nazi vote there, Hamilton challenges traditional arguments that “the” lower middle class voted disproportionately for the NSDAP. He argues that there were at least three discernible lower middle class responses to Nazism, and only one, that of Protestant farmers, entailed majority voting support for Nazism. The urban lower middle classes divided their votes between Nazi, Catholic, and leftist candidates, whereas Catholic farmers displayed an overwhelming lack of enthusiasm at the polls for the NSDAP. In contrast, according to Hamilton, the upper and upper-middle classes voted disproportionately for Nazism. Moreover, in cities such as Berlin, a “fair-sized minority” of workers who had previously voted for nonsocialist and non-Catholic parties supported the NSDAP (p. 91). Hamilton uses such evidence to drive home his point about previous theorizations,


namely, that “claims made with such apodictic certainty about the classes of German society, about their political orientations and behavior, appear to be much less sound, to have much less support than the formulations and the broad consensus would suggest” (p. 35).

This critique takes aim at “centrist” theories of fascism represented in the works of scholars such as Seymour Martin Lipset; mass society approaches of the kind formulated by Hannah Arendt and William Kornhauser; and Marxist theorizing. Eschewing these “structural” explanations for the rise of Nazism, the author focuses on what for him are “nonstructural” variables. I shall discuss these in more detail below. Broadly summarized, his conclusions are twofold. First, he contends that a “group bases” approach emphasizing interpersonal and organizational determinants of political action explains the rise of fascism more satisfactorily than previous theories do. Second, he argues his study demonstrates that “. . . the linkages between social structures and political responses are extremely loose” (p. 451). The implications for the study of fascism are considerable.

Because Hamilton’s interpretive challenge hinges so thoroughly on questioning the empirical basis of previous scholarship, it is necessary briefly to discuss his quantitative evidence before considering broader theoretical issues. The author notes the limitations of ecological analysis: we can never be certain of the electoral choices made by individual members of the upper and upper-middle classes alleged by Hamilton to have voted for the NSDAP. There is inevitable “slippage” (p. 500) when inferring individual behavior from aggregate data. Fortunately, the author does not simply dismiss the problem as an unavoidable methodological cost. Beside discussing the potential fallacies of ecological analysis at various points in the text, he argues that evidence on absentee voters provides a safeguard. Casting ballots in train stations, resort towns, or on ocean liners, these voters must have had relatively large amounts of discretionary income for vacations and day travel, Hamilton assumes, and therefore must have been largely upper and upper-middle class. Reasoning that such groups provide a relatively pure sample from which conclusions about individual preferences can be made safely, Hamilton finds above-average support for Nazism (compared to city-wide totals) among Sunday travellers in Hamburg, Cologne, and other cities, in addition to an extraordinarily high Nazi vote on ships and in resort areas.

Yet the only voters to whom such reasoning applies fully are those who took expensive ocean cruises or vacationed in the most elegant resort establishments. As for Sunday travellers and vacationers generally, there is little reason to assume that these voters were overwhelmingly better-off people. Indeed, Sunday travel or even modest vacations in some resort towns might have been expected from individuals with surprisingly limited resources who, in the face of simultaneous economic depression and an expanding consumer culture, engaged in what academic observers see as financially unsound or
impossible leisure-time practices. In the Lynds’ famous study of Middletown, it might be recalled, twenty-one of twenty-six poor families for whom data was available owned automobiles before they owned bathtubs.6 Hamilton is ultimately more convincing with his analysis of the social composition of vacationers than with his findings on the more complicated urban electoral districts. But even in the case of the former, his assumptions are as open to question as are those of more traditional or less quantitatively inclined scholars of Nazism who receive such scathing criticism throughout the book. Nonetheless, it is impossible to ignore the heuristic value of Hamilton’s speculations.

More important for a general theory of fascism is the discussion of causal factors for Nazi successes. Hamilton argues that “nonstructural” variables associated with political struggle in specific geographical contexts were crucial determining factors in Nazi mobilization. Though the author discusses a range of such variables, his analysis concentrates mainly on the “media effect” of urban newspapers, the “changing positions and relative standings of the parties” (p. 231), and the relative successes of Nazi activists. The first two factors interplayed in different ways and in a variety of settings. With regard to the effect of large urban daily newspapers on the rise of Nazism, for instance, Hamilton argues that the Cologne bourgeois daily read most frequently by the upper classes “was not . . . a reactionary newspaper.” Readers of the Kölnische Zeitung (KZ) “were not being told that the National Socialists were acceptable members of a bourgeois coalition,” as they were being told in Berlin (p. 141). Thus, in contrast to voting patterns in the German capital, upper-middle-class districts in Cologne gave more support to the Nazis than did upper-class precincts. Nonetheless, the KZ, like most bourgeois newspapers, eventually reached an understanding with Nazism, shifting to a limited, tactical acceptance of the movement. Similar differences existed in the behavior of the bourgeois parties. But all these organizations “in no small measure contributed to the rise of the National Socialists” by engaging in a “competition in toughness” (p. 264). This they were bound to lose, argues Hamilton, because of the superiority of trained Nazi cadres, the third element in Hamilton’s explanatory model for the rise of fascist movements. This factor requires closer discussion.

I mentioned above that Hamilton attacks arguments stressing “structurally induced strains” (p. 231) on potential supporters of Nazism. He rejects what he considers to be “deterministic” class analysis in favor of another kind of determinism based on associational, familial, and neighborhood ties. In this context, the actions of Nazi agitators, who strove for the support of indi-

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viduals positioned in these networks, become crucial for explaining the variance of Nazi electoral success where class or religion allegedly played little or no role. The analysis of Spandau, which gave “consistently greater support to the National Socialists than other working-class areas” (p. 99), is illustrative. Nazi electoral gains in this Berlin neighborhood may have been due to “more adept [Nazi] local organization rather than . . . some unique feature of the local social or occupational structure” (p. 99).

As Hamilton moves from an analysis of specific geographical contexts to more general discussion, however, the variable of Nazi activism assumes a more important and eventually dominant role. In his remarks on the effects of Hugenberg’s coalition with the Nazis in the 1929 campaign against the Young Plan, Hamilton rightly emphasizes the importance of the nationalist leader’s publishing resources. But the author finds that “no matter how tough Hugenberg talked, he could hardly outdo the ever-resourceful, ever-ruthless National Socialists” (p. 238). When he discusses “other fascisms,” the author argues that “in some nations the conditions favoring the formation . . . of militant cadres were missing” (p. 462). Referring to Juan Linz’s argument,7 Hamilton writes that in those countries fascist parties were unsuccessful because they were unable to “break into someone else’s political space” (p. 462). Even more revealing is the author’s approving quote of Henry Pachter’s statement that the most significant discovery of the interwar years was that populations were divided into “‘decent people and political gangsters.’” “Political gangsterism,” “totalitarian aspirations,” is allegedly on the rise again in the form of movements such as modern terrorism (p. 474). In short, for Hamilton the critical mass of fascism consists mainly of the presence, organization, and opportunity to act of political gangsters. How useful is this interpretation in working toward a broader theoretical statement of the rise of fascism?

Hamilton’s use of the above-mentioned work of Juan Linz is of considerable interest in this regard. Hamilton notes that Linz outlines four developments—the effects of World War I on European social life, the appearance of revolutionary challenges from the Left, a heightened sense of nationalism, and unresolved cultural and ethnic conflicts within states—that affected the potential for fascist successes in interwar Europe. The author stresses that the first two factors appear to be particularly important for explaining the rise of fascism in Italy and Germany. Indeed, Hamilton’s concentration on Nazi cadres leads him to focus most intensely on the effects of World War I on German political life. He argues that World War I disrupted prior bourgeois

7 Juan Linz, “‘Political Space and Fascism as a Latecomer: Conditions Conducive to Success or Failure of Fascism as a Mass Movement in Inter-War Europe,’” in Who Were the Fascists, Larsen et al., eds., 153–89; and Linz, “Some Notes Toward a Comparative Study of Fascism,” in Fascism, Laqueur, ed., 3–121.
party loyalties and created a pool of “displaced men” (p. 444) who not only experienced war but found their military careers cut short by the limitations of the Versailles Treaty as well. Their “resentment” was fertile ground for mobilization by fascist organizations. Since the group-bases approach begins with the assumption that political loyalties are largely the product of slowly changing interpersonal and organizational networks, the war for Hamilton was a major intervening and “ad hoc” factor that generated sweeping change in political behavior.

The problem with this approach is that it assumes that fascism was largely nonderivative, not only of previous social structural changes but of party political lineages as well. Clearly, fascist movements were different from other bourgeois parties, but they incorporated many of the elements that all prior political contenders had used including not only organized cadres but demagogic speakers, the fervor of bourgeois and working class youth movements, and the pomp and symbolism of everything from student fraternities to socialist parties. By emphasizing the disruptive effects of the war on bourgeois party loyalties, Hamilton ignores considerable fluctuations in Germany’s bourgeois political universe before 1914—the decline of National Liberalism, rise of extraparliamentary pressure groups, constant realignments of left liberal, populist, and anti-Semitic parties. Additionally, major changes in European social life—a reconstitution of social organization and of popular involvement in the public sphere—began at least three decades before World War I and continued to have effect in the war and postwar period. It is no doubt true that “a major catastrophe” or “some decisive issue” can pressure individuals to “rethink their group traditions” (pp. 438–39). But can we be certain that it was the global conflict of 1914–18 that played the biggest part in doing this? Or was it the depression of 1929, another possibility considered by Hamilton? Was not this process of rethinking “group traditions” already well underway before 1929 or even 1914? Indeed, might not slow changes in group traditions, so important to the group-bases theory, have been behind a general propensity in European society for the development of protofascist and then fascist organizations? An alternative theory of fascism must consider how the distinctiveness of these movements also reflected prior social and political developments.

Hamilton’s conceptualization fails on this count because it assumes that group loyalties, though by no means static, nevertheless changed very slowly before war sent European society into a novel cycle of conflict.

Hamilton’s overworking of the link between World War I and politicized cadres generates other problems. Whereas an analysis of fascist cadres is essential for understanding the success of political mobilization in interwar Europe, Hamilton’s approach concentrates too greatly on the role of force. For Hamilton the cadres were successful because they violently dominated public debate. Other groups responded rationally to fascist activists by con-
cluding that the latter could effectively stave off leftist threats, redress economic and social injustices, or restore national pride after defeat and disillusionment in World War I. All of this, it must be emphasized, is crucial. However, the processes whereby potential supporters formulated an impression of fascist movements and decided—rationally—to support them remain unclear in Hamilton’s analysis. The author places much emphasis on the “media effect” of newspapers in larger cities and on interpersonal relationships governing political influence in smaller urban centers and rural environments. But he never explains whether he thinks ordinary people have an impact on opinion leaders. The question of ideology, comprising not only intellectual tradition but everyday collective activities that help to rationalize and make sense of social existence and power relationships, is especially important here. Significantly, Hamilton drops Linz’s third and fourth explanatory factors—nationalism and unresolved cultural conflicts—as he concentrates instead on the forceful imposition of ideas on rational but largely passive populations. Hamilton argues that his is an “interactive” approach to the study of fascism, but how are we to conceptualize interaction between leaders and followers without a fuller discussion of the role of ideology in political and social life? Here is a major “nonstructural” feature that any causal explanation of the rise of fascism must take into account.

It must be emphasized that studying popular influences on ideology is hardly incompatible with a group-bases approach. Because the latter stresses socialization experiences in interpersonal networks, it offers a chance to study groups and individuals within a fuller social, cultural, and political context. In view of this, Hamilton’s analysis could have benefited from a discussion of urban organizational life in the broadest sense of term, a crucial yet unmapped dimension of the social context of fascism. But Hamilton abandons such possibilities in sketching an alternative theory of fascism. He reduces the study of Weimar Germany to “more a struggle of parties than of classes, more a conflict of ideologues than of ordinary citizens” (p. 473). The group-bases approach demands more. Because it is “interactive,” it necessitates a constant widening of discussion to include dynamic relationships between leaders and led. This is particularly essential in the study of fascism, a movement that introduced new mechanisms for integrating popular forces in modern capitalist states.

Even more problematic is Hamilton’s contrasting of the group-bases approach with class analysis of fascism. Hamilton argues that, by demonstrating how interpersonal networks and social ties “determined” Nazism, his analysis implies a much “looser” fit between social structures and politics than does class analysis. In the first place, it is surprising to find that the author

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8 My Social Life, Local Politics, and Nazism: Marburg, 1880–1935 (Chapel Hill, NC, 1986) is an attempt to deal with this issue from the point of view of the small urban polity in Germany.
never considers the contribution of the late Marxist scholar Nicos Poulantzas to this aspect of the theory of fascism. Poulantzas wrote that during fascism, "political struggle of the power bloc against the masses dominates the economic struggle. . . ." and that this politicization fragments the power bloc itself.9 Unwieldy orthodox terminology aside, this is certainly not the kind of remark that fits neatly with Hamilton's argument about the lockstep economic determinism of class analysis. Second, there seems to be no strict and impenetrable line between class and group-bases analyses of fascism. In fact, because it concentrates on the political role of everyday group structures, Hamilton's approach is useful for studying the relationship of social organization on one side and economic life, class formation, ideology, and political contention on the other—the latter including the classic subjects of Marxist analysis. The "worst Marx" is indeed reductive.10 But it goes too far to argue, as Hamilton does, that there exists an inevitable economic functionalism in class theory that precludes analysis of the unpredictability of political change in relation to social existence. Hamilton's perspective might quite easily issue into class analysis without losing the author's important insight regarding the looseness of fit between social process and power. I would suggest that Hamilton's work encourages a careful interplay of "American" group-bases theory and "European" Marxist theories of fascism.

By emphasizing a theoretical mutualism that respects the peculiarities of each approach, students of fascism can construct a dynamic analysis of the "asymmetries" of bourgeois social and political experience in Europe after roughly the 1880s. Here "bourgeois" does not refer solely to the owners of the means of production or their agents, but to a fragmented coalition of strata and classes shaped by specific national conditions and based on capitalist property relations, voluntary associations, the rule of law, and other structures and traditions. Despite Arno Mayer's purposely overstated thesis of persistence of the ancien régime,11 bourgeois values and practices, though marked by the specific national political cultures in which they evolved, had unevenly penetrated almost all areas of life in the major capitalist countries of Europe by the end of the nineteenth century. But obstacles to bourgeois power appeared everywhere—in the rise of powerful national states that simultaneously intervened in all areas of social life and became dispersed and fragmented; in the mobilization of working-class and socialist movements; in the appearance of "mass" political organizations and practices that chal-

10 Richard Johnson, "Reading for the Best Marx: History-Writing and Historical Abstraction" in Making Histories. Studies in History-Writing and Politics, Johnson et al., eds. with a forward by Mary Jo Maynes (Minneapolis, MN, 1982), 200.
lenged elitist bourgeois politics throughout Europe; and in the increasing social differentiation of the bourgeoisie itself.

To summarize drastically, where asymmetries between political and socioeconomic structures were particularly sharp, the appearance of “political gangsters” was more likely because such groups were needed to bridge the growing gap between bourgeois economic, social, cultural, and political experience. World War I either sped up or slowed the evolution of these asymmetries depending on the specific domestic conditions of a country, the outcome of its involvement in the conflagration, and its “placement” within the chain of world economic change after 1918. Where more traditional authoritarian regimes, such as Antonescu’s dictatorship in Romania, could steer these developments, the role of organized fascist cadres was held in check. Where states underpinned by parliamentary democracy had fully integrated contending political forces and balanced asymmetries, fascist squads also found fewer opportunities to mobilize. But where these solutions were not available, a “middle way” was found. In Italy and Germany particularly, political gangsters, who drew on both prewar national traditions and more immediate wartime experiences, were able to propose more violent resolutions to the sharpened asymmetries of bourgeois life.

Because fascist resolutions assumed largely nonclass forms, and because fascist organizations were the first nonsocialist and non-Catholic political groups to mobilize a broad social spectrum of people in Germany and Italy, scholars need not eschew “structural” and class analysis. Rather, they should ask what combination of ideological, social, and political tensions created a need for movements that so insistently rejected “class” as the organizing principle of European society. How and why did fascism address this need? Answers might have a lot to do with the fact that the political gangsters who scrambled to the forefront of fascist mobilization were themselves of indeterminate class origins and that an array of groups from various class positions found supporting such people useful for devising ideological solutions to the asymmetries sketched out above. This approach asks how long-term asymmetries of state power and bourgeois social life articulated with short-term political crises. In my opinion, without such theoretical building blocks, fascism is isolated from its specific political context and reduced to being a manifestation of cyclical (and ahistorical) struggles between “decent people” and rabble-rousing political gangsters. For all of its brilliant insights, Who Voted for Hitler? does precisely this.