Fascism and Fluidity:
Early Marxist Constructions of Generic Fascism

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The historical study of fascism, a topic whose different facets and concentrations constitute an extensive and diverse body of schoiarship, has aiways been piagued by the probiem of definition. Stanley G. Payne contends that "few who attempt to develop a causal theory or explanatory concept of fascism make a serious effort at empirical definition of what they mean by the term ...it is more often than not merely assumed that the identity of 'fascists' is understood."[1] The preeminence of such an ambiguous defmition has resulted in a proliferation of theories that attempt to provide a set of qualifying properties or causal explanations shared by otherwise varied political movements. The search for a unifying defmition has inspired some scholars, in an attempt to account for all the diverse characteristics of movements and regimes traditionally described as fascist, to further muddy the waters by subdividing fascism into several different variations, such as clerico-fascism, anarcho-fascism, agrarian-fascism, etc...[2] How did the concept of fascism initially acquire the tendency to include such diverse political expressions under one banner? How did the definition develop the level of fluidity necessary to account for so

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[1] Stanley G Payne, "The Concept of fascism." In *Who Were the Fascists: Social Roots of European Fascism,* ed. Stein Ugelvik, Bernt Larsen, and Jan Petter M)klebust, (Oslo: Universitetforlaget, 1980), 14.

[2] Gilbert Allardyce, "What Fascism is Not: Thoughts on the Deflation of a Concept," *The American Historical Review* 84, No. 2 (April 1979), 371.

many different qualities? What developments in the history of studying fascism took place in order for this flexible image of 'generic fascism' to develop? Hov. exactly did so man.> diverse movements and regimes come to fall under the same broad yet ambiguous category?

While this paper does subscribe to the criticism leveled against concepts of 'generic fascism', its aim is not to point out the inadequacies of the definition, nor is it to attempt to establish its own theory of fascism, nor to suggest that fascism is an entity that cannot be defined. If one must commit to thinking of the major fascists in any definitive way, then it must be as "a series of radical nationalist movements with revolutionary aims."[3] This essay attempts to trace the historical development of 'generic fascism.' particularly its trademark fluidity, in an effort to determine how exactly the larger definition of fascism became so ambiguous. Influential Marxists of the inter-war years, many of whom were personally engaged in the struggles for power in ltal.> and Germany, emerged as the first writers and thinkers to interpret the phenomenon of fascism, borrowing the term from its Italian origins and applying it to other nations. The early Marxist efforts to define and place fascism do little in terms of identifying a convincing determinant among the proposed fascist movements, but used the term fascism to describe any competing political movement. Originally this usage was limited to entities that did not fall cleanly into either revolutionary or conservative camps, but it was later expanded to include Social Democrats. conservatives, and other elements of

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[3] Ernst Nolte, "[What Fascism is Not: Thoughts on the Deflation of a Concept): Comment," *The American Historical Review* 84, No.2 (April 1979), 389.

[4] David Beetham, "Introduction," in *Manists in Face of Fascism* (Totowa: Barnes & oble, 1984). 1-3.

parliamentary governments. Under certain conditions, Marxist theories suggest that fascism was a completely subordinate agent of capital, and at other times they grant fascism an extreme autonomy. The oscillations in Marxist explanations of fascism correspond to shifting political realities in contest nations, most notably in Germany. It is this Marxist use ofthe tenn fascism, one which was employed strategically against almost any political competitors to the Communist parties, regardless of significant differences in ideoiogy, which served to construct the highly fluid concept of 'generic fascism.'

While there are currently a multitude of interpretations and paradigms that attempt to make sense of fascism, the popular image of fascism that Gilbert Allardyce describes best illustrates the type of 'generic fascism' this paper refers to, "an international movement, a phenomenon that found purest expression in Italy and Gennany, but also appeared in a wide number of other countrics ...[When] stripped of national trappings ...these movements had a common characteristic that was the essence of fascism itself.'[5] The insistence on the international nature offascism, despite the term in the early 1920s being used exclusively in Italy, was originally articulated in the Marxist accounts of the Italian situation. Antonio Gramsci, writing in 1921 Gust five years prior to arrest at the hands ofMussolini's forces), writes "there exists a stratum of the population in all countries – the petty and middle bourgeoisie- ...and this stratum feeds fascism, provides fascism with its troops.'>6 While Gramsci identifies the fascists' support base as the

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s For an accounting and description of the \arious historical interpretations of fascism see Payne, 'The Concept of Fascism." 1-6; Allardyce, "What Fascism is Not," 367.

[6] Antonio Gramsci. "Italia e Spagn ·· (March 1921) in *Marxists in Face of Fascism,* ed. Da,id Beetham (Totowa: Barnes and Nobles, 1984). 82.

intemational middle classes rather than workers or proletariats, he is quick to show concern for the wide electoral appeal the party possessed, stating that "fascism has presented itself as the anti-party; has opened its gates to all applicants."[7] Grarnsci's analysis of fascism focuses almost exclusively on its violent methods, its antagonism toward the Italian Communists, and its potential for political success in the face of proletarian inaction. Gramsci 's early analysis is as prone to contradiction as contemporary efforts, describing fascism at different times as "the symptom of a specifically Italian political decay and as a form of international reaction; as a criminal conspiracy and a broad social movement; as the instrument of the petty-bourgeois masses, and the agent of the most reactional) elements among the major owners of land and capital.'[8] In light of the nature of Marxist dialectics, the apparently contradictory description of fascism that Gramsci articulates is entirely permissible. Yet, the effect such a contradictory image has, particularly once it has been removed from its Marxist context, is to supply 'generic fascism' with a strong dose of ambiguity. If the efforts of academics to define fascism can be thought of as an attempt at political taxonomy, then it is necessary to identify the commonalities and eliminative differences of the objects being defined.

Gramsci's early description of fascism. which in accordance with Marxist dialectics takes into account fascism's inherent contradictions, as well as the negations produced by its interactions with other external forces, avoids the economic determinism that links fascism solely"" ith capital. This determinism is present in the thought

[7] Antonio Gramsci, "Forte Elementari," (April, 1921) in *Marxists in Face of Fascism,* 84.
[8] Beetham, "Introduction." *5.*

of the Communist activist Karl Radek, along with the image of fascism as a major political challenger to Communist parties. In a speech to the fourth Comintern Congress, convened just after Mussolini's march on Rome in November of 1922, Radek commits to the new line, saying "the fascists represent the petty bourgeoisie, which has come to power with the support of capitalism and which will be compelled to carry out capitalism's programme, not that of the petty bourgeoisie."[9] More interesting than the assessment of fascism as the lap-dog of capitalism is the concern that Radek has for fascism's appeal to what could otherwise be Marxist supporters. Speaking on fascism's popularity, Radek says "although fascism has very few supporters in the industrial centers, in the countryside it has not only overcome the workers by force of arms, but has won them for its nationalist policy as well."[10] This concern with fascism's political prowess, found in Gramsci's writing but expanded upon in Radek's speech, speaks to a larger concern about the nature of political competition between the Communists and fascists. Although Radek minimizes the role of the fascists to one servicing a much more powerful strata ofItalian society, and suggests the reformist Italian Socialists had enabled Mussolini's rise, he still considered fascism's success as "not merely a mechanical victory for fascist arms, but the heaviest efeat that socialism and communism have suffered since the start of the period of world revolution."[11] What is made clear is that any challengers to the

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[9] Karl Radek, "Speech to the Fourth Comintem Congress," (November 1922) in *Marxists in Face of Fascism,* ed. David Beetham (Totowa: Barnes & Noble, 1984). 99-101.

[10] fbid. 101.

[11] Ibid, 99-103.

Communist's attempts at gaining power, be it in Italy, Germany, or Spain, who do not belong to the reformist Socialists or traditional conservative parties, are "dangerous fascists."

The image of fascism as an international challenger to Communist parties, as a political fonn that recruited from similar ranks of the masses, and as an explicitly anti-Marxist phenomenon is further developed by the German Communist Klara Zetkin. In a speech given in 1923 to the Enlarged Executive of the Comintern, Zetkin continues the line of thought found in Radek's speech, commenting that "fascism is the classic expression, the most powerful and concentrated form, of the general offensive of the international bourgeoisie." [12] However, Zetkin provides a causal analysis lacking in Gramsci and Radek. She differentiates the particulars of fascism's subordination to capital, suggesting that fascism was not the punitive reaction of capital in response to Socialist revolution abroad, but instead the desperate defensive force of capitalist elements during a period of economic crisis. Even more than Radek, Zetkin warns of the threat fascism posed to the Communists by way of appealing to the masses. She suggests that "the bearers offascism are not a small caste, but broad social strata, popular masses, reaching even into the proletariat," and that "only when we understand that fascism exercises a 5tirring and overpowering influence on broad masses of the population ...will we be able to combat it."[13] Anxiety about fascism swaying workers and newly proletarianized members of the middle class is a pervasive theme in all

[12] Klara Zetkin, "Speech to the Enlarged executive of the Comintcm," (June 1923) in *Marxists in Face o.f Fascism,* ed. Oa\id Bcctham, (Totowa: Barnes & Noble, 1984), 103.
[13] Ibid. 104.

of the Marxists here considered. Zetkin was the first to specifically suggest that fascism is making serious inroads among the proletariat, and that the "communist parties outside of Russia are not without responsibility ...that there are disillusioned elements among the proletariat who throw themselves into the fascist embrace."[14]

The preeminent concern of limiting fascism's allure among the Marxist's own support base, the largely tactical frame of reference taken when djscussjng fascjsm, and the propagandist tone of their thoughts all betray attempts at defmition. Accounts of what these fascists actually believed or the values that they held, are utterly absent from the Marxist works. This is consistent with the Marxist conceptions of base and superstructure. Fascism, as a political power structure, belongs to the superstructure, something that is entirely dictated by the base, or the economic modes of production of a given nation. What the fascists thought ofthemselves, what they claimed themselves to be, and even perhaps the specific actions they took would have seemed unimportant to Marxists like Zetkin at the time. Yet, what is leftover is essentially an image of a competing political movement, one whose orientation could range from socialistic to staunchly conservative (although Gramsci, Radek and Zetkin all suggest that fascism's embrace of socialism and worker's rights is only a nominal one), and whose one common element appears to be threatening the Communist parties' hegemony of proletarian and downwardly mobile middle-class supporters. One can easily see the advantage of such an ambiguous defmition, especially when it is complemented with the 'antifascist' image of"jackboots, barbed wire and corpses: irrational,

[14] Ibid, 105.

anti-Semitic, totalitarian, and genocidal."[15] The inherent vagueness of Marxist constructions of 'generic fascism', even if it is consistent when considering base and superstructure, serves the purpose of transforming itself to any political situation in which another entity challenges the Communist position. This definition allows almost anyone to be a fascist, so long as they were not clearly something else, like a Social Democrat or a traditional conservative; however, ith the development of the theory of social-fascism, even these elements could find their way into the fascist camp.[16]

The development and implementation of social-fascism by the Communist International and the respective Communist parties of Europe marks the true arrival of fluidit) and variation within the concept of 'generic fascism.' The term has a long and complex history, one almost as long and complicated as fascism itself, but its origins can be found in the Leninist tradition of attacking non-revolutionary socialists.[17] In accordance with the Leninist tendency to blame revolutionary setbacks on Social-Democrats, the Soviet politician and Comintern chairman Grigory Zinoviev was one of the earliest Marxist thinkers to equate Social-Democracy with fascism. This rush to associate the two political camps was heralded b} the defeat of German Communists at the hands of the military and conservative forces in 1923. The German Communists were quick to announce that the actions of General von Seeckt firmly established the Weimar republic's transition into fascism. It was this analysis of the events in 1923, one

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ts Allard,ce. 370.

[16] Beetham, "lntroduction," 17-25.

[17] Theodore Draper, 'The Ghost of Social Fascism".*Commentat)'*. Februal) 1969. 30-31.

which did not implicate the Social-Democrats, which inspired Zinoviev's amalgamation of Social Democracy and fascism.[18] Writing on international Social Democrats, Zinoviev comments,

> What are Pilduski and the others? Fascist Social-Democrats. Were they this ten years ago? No. It goes without saying they were already then fascists *in nuce*. But they have become fascists precisely because we are living in the epoch of revolution. What is Italian Social-Democracy? It is a wing of the fascists; Turati is a fascist Social-Democrat. Could this statement have been made five years ago? No. Think of a group of academicians who gradually developed into a bourgeois force. Italian Social-Democracy is now a fascist Social-Democracy. Take Turati, D'Aragona, or the present Bulgarian government Socialists. They were opportunists, but could one say ten years ago that they were fascist Social-Democrats? No, that would have be n stupid then. Now they are that.[19]

Hostility towards Social-Democrats had been a hallmark of Communist activity since the days of the Russian Revolution. However, the attempt to link them with fascism was something entirely new, and this development corresponded to certain political assessments by the Com intern and Communist parties concerning the situation in Germany. While Zinoviev laid the fundamental groundwork, Joseph

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•• Ibid, 29-31. It should be noted that von Seecl,"t has since been regarded as specificall non-fascist in the e'es of most historians.

[19] Grigory Zinovie . "Die Lehrein der dcutschen Ereigneise," quoted in Theodore Draper, "The Ghost of Social-Fascism," *Commentary,* Februat) 1969. 30.

Stalin and other Communist leaders would come to fully construct the theol) of social-fascism in the late 1920s. By the end of the decade, it was clear that the Communist parties subscribed to the view that "Social Democrats once more [were] the main obstacle to revolution, and hence the target of Communist attack. Now, however, they were seen not merely as counter-revolutionary, but actually fascist."[20] This theorizing took place within the Marxist parameters set in the early 1920s, specifically that fascism was a form of politics that symbolized the last days of the capitalist regime and also represented capitalist reaction, and as early as 1924 Stalin was referring to Social Democrats as "the moderate wing of fascism," and as "twins."[21]

The view of the Comintern and the KPD identified Social-Democracy as the main threat to Communist power in Germany continues the pattern of Marxists extending the term fascism to include political competitors who possessed the capability to recruit among the proletariat and lower middle classes.[22] If ever there was a pa1ty whose message and ideology could appeal to supporters who would otherwise be revolutionary Marxists, it was the Social-Democrats. Lea Haro has suggested that the Comintern toward the end of the 1920s was increasingly coming under the sway of Stalinism, and that the development of social-fascism corresponded with internal struggles, most specifically with the need of Stalin and the Comintem to create

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[0] Bectham. ·'Introduction,.. J 7-19.

[21] Joseph Stalin, ..Concerning the International Situation...*Bolshevik, no. II*. Sept. 1924, in *Marxists in the Face of Fascism.* ed. Oa\id Beetham (Toto"a: Barnes & oble, 1984), 153-154.

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enemies.[23] Whatever the true contexts of its developments were, the adoption of social fascism as the dominant view among the Comintern and KPD produced, in the light of history what can only be described as deeply ironic views on whom they considered to be fascists. Not only did the KPD claim that General Von Seeckt (who was granted emergency powers by the Weimar government to deal with, of all people, Adolf Hitler and his unsuccessful putsch in Bavaria) and other eiements of the Weimar government were fascists, but as late as 1932 Ernst Thalmann, the leader of the KPD, was warning against "opportunistic over-estimations of Hitler-fascism," and continuing to identify the Social Democrats as the deadliest threat to the KPD.[24]

In terms of how the Marxist accounts of fascism influenced the development of a 'generic fascism,' it is clear that they supply a certain level of fluidity or malleability.[25] While the development of social-fascism within the larger Marxist response to fascism may have prevented the Comintern and the KPD from rearticulating their ideas about fascism, and consequently immobilizing them in the face of Nazi aggression, it opened the gates to include any number of diverse political groups under the deftnition of fascism. It should be noted that while this paper has concentrated speciftcally on the Communist efforts to paint the Social Democrats as fascist, the coupling of social-fascism with the interpretation of fascism as capitalist reaction actually

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[23] Lea Haro, "Entering a Theoretical Void: The Theo of Social Fascism and Stalinism in the German Communist Party," *Critique: Journal of Socialist Theory* 39, No.4 (December 20II), 579-582.

[24] Communist Party of Germany (KPD), "The Victory of Fascism over the November Republic,·· *Internationale Presse Korrespondenz,* Vol. 3 (1923), in *Marxists in Face of Fascism,* 148-151; Ernst Thlilmann, "Der revolutionlire Ausweg und die KPD," (Berlin, I932), in *Marxists in Face of Fascism,* 161-167.

[25] zs Haro, "Entering a Theoretical Void," 566.

indicated that "all capitalist regimes, parliamentary or dictatorial, were defined as fascist."[26] It did not take long for the course of history in Germany to reveal the mistaken nature of the Communist views on fascism, as well as the opinion that the Social Democrats were their key opponents.

By 1935, with the political reality in Germany nov.. being clearly ascertainable, the Comintern and KPD entered into a period of gross revisionism. In a speech at the seventh Congress of the Communist International, after recounting the previous assertions of fascism as reaction, Georgi Dmitrov stated "the ascension to power of fascism must not be conceived of in so simplified and smooth a form, as though some committee or other of finance capital decided on a certain date to set up a fascist dictatorship."[27] This new interpretation does not completely divorce fascism from capitalism, but it certainly assigns to fascism a much more sovereign existence. Keeping with tradition, he is insistent on placing the blame on the Social Democrats, but despite all the Communist rhetoric that was aimed against them, and all of the theoretical musing that suggested they were actually social-fascists, Dmitrov reluctant!) offers up a revision, "[the Communists] should have a united anti-fascist proletarian front, forced the Social Democratic leaders to put a stop to their campaign against the Communists and to accept the repeated proposals of the Communist party for united action against fascism."[28] This almost comical revision

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[6] Bcctham, "Introduction:· 17.

[.1] Georgi Dirnitrov, "The Working Class against Fascism,.. (London. 1935), in *Marxists in Face of Fascism.* 179.

[:R] Ibid. 183. The term 'united front' is used in two different senses by \1arxists of the era. Prior to the rise of Hitler in German . the call for the united front suggested one composed of proletariats, Communist and Social Democratic supporters, against the

of fascism and the corresponding Communist strategy served to widen the forces aligned against fascism, similar to the way social-fascism widened the enemies of the Communists. This fmal position on fascism adopted by the Comintem illustrates not only the remarkable fluidity inherent to Marxist constructions of 'generic fascism,' but also reveals the polemical nature in which they used the tenn. It is clear that the Marxist conception of fascism had more to do with cettain political realities than with describing an objective phenomenon; in essence, the idea of fascism came to be used as a tool for Marxists to defme political others in ways that they found appealing.

In the same speech that announced the about-face of the Comintem, Dmitrov states that Marxists "are not historians divorced from Living reality." [29] This statement rings true throughout the Marxist treatment of fascism presented in this paper. The living reality that Dmitrov mentions can best be understood as the uncertain political environment in which these Marxists were operating. The shaky environments, as well as the nature of politics in general, influenced the inter-war Marxists to view fascism with the hasty eye of the political tactician rather than the patient gaze of a historian. In fairness, it is doubtful that any of these figures set out to define fascism in any academic sense. The extent to which they attempted to understand fascism only went as far as the political situation at hand demanded; if Mussolini or Hitler had posed no serious threat to the Communist parties between the World Wars, it is doubtful that any notable Marxist

supposedly corrupt leadership of the SD parties. Post-Hitler, the Communists rearticulated the tenn to mean a united front of both Social Democrats and Communists against fascism.

[29] Dmitrov, 185.

would have made an effort to explain fascism at all. The Marxist analysis of fascism failed in two ways: first, it failed to enable the Communist parties of Italy and Gennan)' to politically defeat competitors that they identified as fascist; second, it completely failed to identify a determining feature of fascism. The strategic use of the term fascism, well documented in the preceding pages, largely served to describe any political competitors in contest nations. While the bias and problematic nature of early Marxist interpretations of fascism has been previously acknowledged, the Marxist's unique position as the first theorists of fascism give their views a surprising level of influence.[30] Many contemporary efforts to establish general criteria of fascism, struggling to find any elements that can satisfactorily be applied to every regime and movement, resort to the same kind of description that the early Marxists did, mainly negation.[31] Just as the Marxists commented on the elusive and contradictory nature of fascism, onl) allowing it to be defined essentially as anything non-Marxist, contemporary research also suggests that we can only come to know what fascism is by knowing what it is not. This concept of 'generic fascism' produced by the collective Marxist thought of the 1920s and 1930s constructs an image of an international phenomenon, one that appeals to a wide spectrum of people, and that can possess a range of ideological convictions (nationalism, socialism, nominative socialism, violence, etc...), but is also specifically non-Marxist. The extent to which the constructions of fascism developed by the inter-war Marxists have influenced historical inquiry on fascism is certainly

[30] Payne, "The Concept of Fascism," 16.
[31] Ibid.

debatable. However, the prevalence and preeminence of 'generic fascism' within the research is undeniable. Any effort to explain, interpret or theorize fascism must naturally begin with some conception of what fascism is or is not. The 'generic concept', as ambiguous as it is, has the tendency to prevent scholarship on fascism from ever reaching any kind of meaningful conclusion about who the fascists were, what they believed, and how they came to believe it.

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