

Life, History, and Political Modernism

Much has been written on the intellectual origins of Nazism, but historians have paid relatively little attention to the intellectual current of “life-ideology” that influenced fascist movements within and beyond Germany’s borders. Normally, scholars tend to make a few cursory remarks about the “vitalism” of Henri Bergson and the “life philosophy” of Friedrich Nietzsche, the originator of the idea that “life is the will to power.” In the following, I would like to draw attention to the concept of “life ideology” that was introduced in 1994 by the literary critic and media scholar Martin Lindner, whose study on life-ideological ideas in academic and literary works from the turn of the century to the Third Reich offers much food for thought for an exploration of the origins of the Nazi “ideological field” (Raphael 2001 and 2006).

The concept of “life,” which came into fashion at the turn of the century, was very much *en vogue* among philosophers and literati as well as sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists, and biologists. As the example of Friedrich Ratzel’s concept of “living space” shows, it was also highly influential for geographers. What, however, is to be understood by the term “life ideology”? Lindner presents life-ideological thinking as a “spatial structure”—its proponents constructed a polarity between the static “form” of superficial civilizational phenomena on the one hand and, on the other, what actually lay behind them—the deeply concealed and dynamic “life” of a culture. Form and life, then, were dialectically opposed phenomena, with the first extending from and also acting on the second. This dialectic inevitably produced a crisis, and life-ideologues were indeed crisis merchants, guided by a constant awareness of crisis which they themselves had helped produce. As far as they were concerned, the crisis arose inevitably from the fact that the superficial social “form” had become overweening, constricting “life” and threatening it with suffocation.

This awareness of crisis was characteristic of all life-ideologues, but the suggested solutions varied. Lindner differentiates between “radical” and “moderate,” “conservative” and

“progressive” advocates but, significantly, what united life-ideologues of all hues was the tendency to think in anti-pluralistic categories of social homogeneity; to find resolutions of the dialectic mentioned above through “creative destruction” and a collective “rebirth.” Such a rebirth would offer the individual access to a heightened experience through unity with the collective “organism.” As early as the 1880s, the outlines of this argument had been sketched by the sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies, who denigrated “society” as mechanistic and artificial in comparison to “the community,” which was laudably organic and authentic, i.e. true-to-life.

Why did life-ideological thinking become so attractive around the turn of the century, and why did it prove seductive to those on both the right and left of the political spectrum? The answer to this question lies partly in the loss of influence of historical thinking—indeed, the orientation to “life” corresponded with a “turning away from history” (Schnädelbach 79–87, 179–81). The liberal idea of history as a “process of enduring and increasing advancement” (Koselleck 1979, 363) lost plausibility: instead, temporal development was increasingly viewed in categories of (social) Darwinist evolution rather than idealistic progress. Moreover, it seemed that historical thinking could no longer produce the kind of knowledge needed in order to orient oneself toward the world. History’s attempt to understand phenomena “in their time and place,” its critics complained, precluded it from creating the kind of principles that *transcended* time.

This development has been variously characterised as a “crisis of historicism” (Ernst Troeltsch), a “departure from the historical model of time” (Wolfgang Hardtwig) or an “anti-historical revolution” (Kurt Nowak, borrowing from Hermann Heimpel). But whatever we choose to call it, historical thinking’s loss of plausibility was a fundamental condition for the emergence of the ideological field of National Socialism. This ideological field was part of a broader field of intellectual experimentation—a field which could never have come into being without a concomitant loss of faith in the idea of gradual, linear historical development and progress. In the eighteenth century, the “fire of the sense of possibility” (Robert Musil) had been kindled by the Enlightenment and French Revolution, but by the turn of the twentieth, it

had developed into a veritable wildfire, a vastly expanded tendency to “think of everything that could be, and to take what *is not* just as seriously as what actually *is*” (Musil 16, 152. My own translation).

The deeper causes of this intellectual change cannot be discussed in detail here. But if we accept that its onset can indeed be traced to the turn of the century, then the pre-eminent status of the First World War as the key to understanding this expansion of the intellectual realm of possibility is placed in question—however significant the war was as a social “laboratory” (Etzemüller 30). Recent research has further strengthened the notion that socio-economic and political-cultural change accelerated rapidly from the 1880s—indeed, the historian Ulrich Herbert has suggested that the onset of “high modernity” can be traced to this period. This was a time characterised by a “feverish search for answers to an avalanche of new challenges”—to industrialisation, urbanisation and the rationalisation of everyday life (Herbert 2007, 11). Heinz Dieter Kittsteiner, too, has posited a model of historical stages which traces the beginning of an epoch of “heroic modernity” to the 1880s. This phase, Kittsteiner contends, witnessed the ceaseless production of social utopias populated by “new men” (2003)—all further evidence of the on-going crisis in historical thinking described above.

Many historians now understand the spread of this social-technological imperative of reordering, and the “crisis of historicism” which accompanied it, as part of a movement toward “political modernism.” Political modernists were advocates of social experiments, calling for a “new beginning” and a reimagined future (Griffin 2007). Nationalist-oriented variants of this political-modernist drive for renewal were united by the notion that the present was a time of “cultural decay,” no longer rooted in eternal, time-transcending ideas such as “race,” “nation,” and yes, “life”—a tale of national suffering which could only be redeemed through a “rebirth.” In actual fact, of course, such a “rebirth” would produce untold suffering, and death instead of life.

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