

Authoritarian school reforms: Ideal and practices in fascist movements

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General Description

Considering the current apprehension regarding the rise of “new nationalism” (*The economist*, 2016) and “new authoritarianism” (*Die Zeit*, 2016), questions on the relationship between authoritarian, nationalist ideals about society, politics, and education become pertinent. Education, as Biesta (2012) observes, is a “teleological practice”; it is always directed towards a particular “outcome”. Educational reforms are explicitly formulated or enacted to bring about or to hinder particular visions of society (Greiffenhagen, 1978). This leads us to question whether educational ideas, practices, and reforms have a specific appearance if the outcome to be reached is not a liberal, pluralistic, democratic state and society, but an authoritarian single-party regime and an ideologically, genetically, and culturally pure and homogenous people? If, according to Honneth (2012), education should be conceived as the “twin-sister of democratic theory” (p. 430), what does authoritarianism’s ‘twin-sister’ look like? Does it have a specific look at all?

These are the questions this symposium intends to examine in order to advance the theoretical and methodological discussion in two fields: firstly, the existence and/or shape of a fascist authoritarian education, and secondly, the relationship between societal and political ideals and educational reforms. One

way to shed light into these fields is to comparatively analyse the fascist or national socialist movements that emerged in the first half of the twentieth century within (and beyond) Europe. Whether in Germany, Latvia, or Italy, these movements radically questioned their contemporary societies and politics. In their eyes, the current social and political order was weak, diverse, unjust, unstable and should thus be replaced by a homogenous, authoritarian *Volksgemeinschaft*, and a single-party regime. This radicalism makes these movements particularly valuable for looking into how political and societal visions configure education and vice-versa.

Traditionally, historical research on education and fascism has produced single case studies focusing on a limited selection of prominent countries, namely Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, or Francoist Spain. This literature denies the existence of a set consistent fascist or authoritarian educational ideas, practices, and reforms (e.g. Tenorth, 2003) and concludes that, rather than ideology, it is administrative power struggles and institutional resilience that explain fascist educational policies (Horn et al., 2010). However, given these studies focus on countries where fascist or national socialist movements won internal political struggles and acquired the power to put their educational agenda into political practice, they fail to separate ideology and programmes from their implementation.

By helping to develop new tools for historical studies in this field, this symposium tests another approach. Firstly, instead countries or political regimes, our cases are fascist movements. Belgium, Norway, and Switzerland may not be the first states that come to mind when talking about fascism, but between the 1920s and the 1940s they were all confronted with fascist movements acting within their borders. Despite meeting different political, institutional, and cultural frameworks, based on their ideology the Flemish National Union (Belgium), the Nasjonal Samling (Norway), and the Nationale Front (Switzerland) are strikingly similar. Crucially, they all requested a radical restructuring of society along a series of common denominators and defined how education was to be reformed in order to reach their vision.

Secondly, instead of a historiographical reconstruction of one case, we propose to confront three cases with the two research questions presented earlier. From a methodological and theoretical point of view, this proceeding allows for comparing different approaches to create a common ground for further research, for it seems a great variance of theoretical traditions underlies the research on fascist education. It can also help generate some early hypotheses about the circumstances and mechanisms explaining differences and commonalities in authoritarian and fascist education.

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Paper 1:

“Education roots in the *Volksgemeinschaft*”

An analysis of the educational journal *Vlaamsche Paedagogiek*, 1941-1944

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In 1943, Herman de Vleeschauwer, the educational ideologue of the Flemish National Union published his *For a national cultural and educational program*. The brochure was a blueprint for a reform of the Belgian cultural scene and the educational system according to Flemish nationalist ideals. In his program, the idea of the *Volksgemeinschaft* stood central. According to de Vleeschauwer, the state was the emanation of the people, and, therefore, had to play a central role in the organization of schools. During the war, some educational movements went even further in their efforts to reform education. The *Diets Opvoedkundige Beweging*, a movement initiated in 1937 by a group of young Flemish teachers, aimed to use the school as a way to establish a Greater Netherlands. Therefore, Belgian education needed to be reformed according to the German model, and needed to center on ideas of racial purity, discipline, character, *Heimatkunde*, and antisemitism.

In the existing literature about the German occupation of Belgium (1940-1944), these two movements have become the most common examples of how Fascist groupings considered the reform of education as a necessary condition for the establishment of a New Order. However, the fact that there were some educational reformers that combined traditional and anti-modern with progressive educational ideas, remains understudied.

This article presents an analysis of the educational journal *Vlaamsche Paedagogiek* (Flemish Pedagogy), a journal that was published between 1941 and 1944 by two established educationalists. The journal presents a remarkable combination of progressive educational ideas, such as an emphasis on the free development of the child, and an anti-modern and anti-democratic discourse, founded on ideas of the *Volksgemeinschaft* and the importance of *Heimatkunde*. This paper documents the attractiveness of progressive education for

flamingant educationalists and teachers, who were convinced that the *Volksgemeinschaft*, organized around the national history and popular Flemish language, could be achieved by a child-centered pedagogy.

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Paper 2:

A National Socialist School for Norway?

Concepts of Nazification and Attempts of Realisation during the German Occupation

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The occupation of Norway in 1940 and the attempts to implement a "new order" ended a process of democratisation that had lasted for more than 100 years. In close cooperation with the local fascist party Nasjonal Samling, the German occupants started their encroachment on the Norwegian society. For transforming Norway into a totalitarian National socialist state and for integrating it into a planned "Greater Germanic Reich", a fully nazification of society was needed.

As in Nazi Germany, the ideologisation of the school teaching was regarded as an indispensable presumption to carry out these plans. The Norwegian school children should become transformed into convinced National Socialists and the teachers willing "political soldiers" of the "Volksgemeinschaft". As soon as a collaboration regime was established, the Nasjonal Samling reinforced their encroachment on the school sector. The nazification of the school became a matter of prestige for the party.

Since the attempts of nazification met a massive *and* successful civilian resistance, motivated and organised by the teachers, very little attention has been paid to the ideas and concepts about a Norwegian National socialist school. How was a fascist education in Norway supposed to look like? Did Nasjonal Samling develop own concepts for the school – before and during the occupation? Or were most plans and strategies imported from Nazi Germany? Did representatives of the German civilian administration in Norway, the

Reichskommissariat, had own ideas for the Norwegian school? And how and to which extent did strategies and plans turn into practical measures?

By investigating these questions, the presentation will discuss the ideas and practices of a fascist education in Norway during the German occupation. Linking it to the cases of Switzerland and Belgium will make it possible to ask more specific what is particular Norwegian and what is charactering an overarching fascist educational ideology.

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Paper 3:

Fascist movements and education in interwar Switzerland: ideas and practices in school reform

Thomas Ruoss & Anja Giudici

The image of Switzerland as an antifascist stronghold has played a vital role in the country's post-war self-perception. Still, Switzerland did have its very own authoritarian fascist movements; the so-called *Fronten*. Whereas they approved of some Swiss particularities, namely multilingualism and federalism, the installation of an "authoritarian democracy", a corporative economic order, and a homogenous *Volksgemeinschaft* were aims Swiss fascists shared with their counterparts all over Europe and the U.S.

Neither historical nor educational research have remarked upon the extraordinarily strong involvement of educators – teachers and educational scientists – in these movements' leadership, or considered the programmatic literature on education they authored. This paper fills this gap by studying the pedagogical ideas and practices of the protagonists of Switzerland's main fascist organisation, the Nationale Front, at the peak of its popularity (1933–1938). To contribute to the comparative questions the symposium raises we focus on two aspects.

Firstly, we ask if the shared goals of fascist educational experts and working groups resulted in a consistent set of educational theories, concepts, and reform plans. We argue that, despite the existence of a general ideological consensus regarding the role of schooling in fostering a healthy, homogenous, and disciplined people, the concrete measures envisioned to reach this aim vary. Additionally, differentiating them from those contemporary educational concepts not directed towards an authoritarian revolution is methodologically and theoretically challenging.

Secondly, we focus on how these actors relate their societal-political visions to educational reforms. We find that they did not attribute schooling any role in pursuing a fascist revolution. Despite having several educators and educational administrators in their ranks, Swiss fascist ideologues did not plan to undermine present society by reforming schooling 'from within'. They conceived schooling as an inherently conservative factor that was to be reformed 'from above' after the authoritarian revolution had come along.

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