



Robert Menasse

Haider, the undetected Austrofascist

Jörg Haider was on the brink of a political comeback when he died in a car accident in October. Throughout his career, Haider's critics in Austria made a disastrous mistake, writes Robert Menasse. They suspected him of fascism, yet didn't understand it correctly — and therefore couldn't react adequately.

In Austria the death of a public person isn't certified by a doctor, but by the media: when even enemies, opponents and rivals give three cheers for someone in the papers and on TV, then we can be sure the person really is dead. What in Austria is described as "piety", that is, the sudden agreement only to say good about someone, is in truth no more than its distant relative, the Austrian cultural trick of replacing a concrete person with a legend, making it possible both to repress his true actions and their consequences and at the same time to adopt them as "heritage".

In the sphere of culture one may, with a shrug and an ironic smile, chalk this up as "compensatory injustice". It is what happened to Thomas Bernhard. All through his writing life he had been denigrated as an enemy of the Austrian state by a profoundly Austrian coalition of resentment and hate made up of subscribers to *die Presse* and readers of the *Kronen Zeitung*. No sooner was he dead than these same "patriots" turned him into a national legend: "A great writer! And we produced him!" The latter is true of course, but not in the way they meant. Left over are the words "great writer" — and those who always said so now nod in time with his former enemies. That's the way old enmities are buried in Austria.

The deterioration of the concept of fascism

In political life, however, and in particular in the case of Jörg Haider, this trick is a public danger and cannot be laughed off. Because Jörg Haider was a fascist.

There's no impiety in saying that. Because if there's agreement in Austria that one should only speak good of the dead, then the agreement is very well served by stating this truth. For fascists it's surely a good thing if someone who is in the process of being turned into a legend was a fascist, and for anti-fascists it's good if it's said out loud.

If objections are raised nevertheless, then that's thanks to a further Austrian peculiarity, because neither the majority of the fascists nor most anti-fascists know exactly what fascism is, how it really shows itself in mentalities, in political ideas, intentions and actions.

There's a simple reason for that. In Austria the term fascism does not describe a form of political extremism, but is a synthesis of two extremes which cancel one another out: on the one hand it describes something so atrociously demonic, that only a demon, but hardly a real human being of flesh and blood would match up to it. (This was formulated in exemplary form in 1986 by Michael Graff, then secretary and justice spokesman of the Christian conservative Austrian People's Party: "If it can't be proven that someone strangled six Jews with his own hands, then he's innocent!") At the same time the word is so trivialised by concerned souls, who suspect nothing less than fascism on every possible occasion, that it finally ends up being applied to almost anything and everything, but not really to anyone in particular.

If one takes this deterioration of the fascism concept into account, then it is possible to get a little closer to the superficially iridescent ambivalence of Jörg Haider, which he displayed and made use of, and to the reasons for the uncertainty about how to define him politically.

Jörg Haider was born in 1950, so he is part of what today is commonly called the '68 generation. Strange, that in all the discussions about him this was never mentioned. Imagine it: an undoubtedly intelligent young man, who, when his contemporaries everywhere were rebelling and turning against their Nazi fathers and their father's generation, precisely does not break with his parents, who not only had a National Socialist past, but remained loyal to Nazi ideology. He once explained it like this: he had got so much love from his parents that it was impossible for him to question their world-view, their biographies and their actions. The remark that he, their offspring, the child of the democratic Second Austrian Republic, had always seen his parents as "unimpeachable democrats" because "they always went to vote" can be regarded both as a later expression of empty cynicism as well as the truth about the state of his political education back then.

But the spirit of the times did touch him in those formative years: the fundamentally heretical, anti-authoritarian, playful insolence of it all must have fascinated him and left its mark — the celebrated power of the imagination and the solution, "power to the imagination", as much as the reconstruction of socialism and justice, above all the widely discussed contradiction between a sense of justice on the one hand and the law on the other.

He studied law and also absorbed this: the ideological fetishisation of the imagination, the pleasure in the heretical and a skewed sense of justice. He thought what had been demanded of his parents after 1945 was unjust. As idealists they only ever wanted the best, yet had been temporarily deprived of their civil rights and on top of that had been forced to feign the betrayal of their ideals. This was to remain characteristic of him throughout his career: as a trained jurist to imaginatively break the law with the gesture of a "natural" sense of justice.

Haider's fascination with '68

If he had not soaked up '68 like a sponge, then, given his loyalty to his family history, he would have become a rightwing extremist sectarian like Gottfried Küssel or Michael Kühnen, *ein Führer ohne Volk*.

But if he had responded consistently to '68 and made a break with his parents, then he could have become what he repeatedly claimed for himself: to be the

political inheritor and successor of Bruno Kreisky.¹

But these are speculations and only justified to the extent that Jörg Haider himself often said words to that effect.

At any rate, in this contradiction between sympathy for Nazism and fascination with '68 two things were clear to him — and one can study it as a Hegelian cancellation of a contradiction: first, that "pure" Nazi nostalgia and "pure" Nazi programme were definitively finished in society at large. Second, that a youthful anti-authoritarianism, which ultimately itself makes a new form of authoritarianism fashionable, can set a society in motion.

Where does one end up, when one gives up the specifically Nazi aspects of a Nazi formation, which were politically and programmatically truly finished? The dream of a Greater German Reich incorporating Austria, systematic military re-arming for the purpose of carrying out wars of conquest, the physical extermination of the Jews, political opponents and physical and mental deviants from the norm — if one subtracts that from Nazism then, in Austria, at least, one inevitably ends up with Austrofascism. Not necessarily with every programmatic detail, but more or less with its character. This character, however, now shows through: the Austrofascist wants an authoritarian state, replaces extermination with exclusion, blood and soil with homeland, racism with aggressive patriotism; the Austrofascist political leader interprets constitution and legal system as embodying mere rights to self-empowerment.

Austrofascism without fustiness

Haider's Austrofascism did not have the fustiness of the Dollfuss and Schuschnigg Austria of the 1930s, and that was because he sold it with the zip of a '68 student leader. Young, light-heartedly impudent, imaginative, displaying authoritarian mania as anti-authoritarian manner. But those who were interested enough understood him: Jörg Haider was the first student leader whom the old also cheered. To them he was "our lad", a chip off the old block.

Haider's Austrofascism was not recognised as such, not because of the youthful impudence of his public appearances, but because of the Austrian conception of fascism itself. As has already been said, fascism in Austria is first of all associated with the systematic crimes of Nazism, or with some commotion or other at inn tables or in beer tents. If fascism is only defined in terms of Nazism, then Haider was no fascist. But if everything is described as fascist that simply describes the authoritarian character of the next door neighbour, but which is perceived as social normality by the overwhelming majority of a democratic state, then nothing and no one is fascist, including Haider.

New words instead of new values

The problem with Austrofascism is that, unlike National Socialism, it was never subject to sanctions and never addressed critically. The murderers of workers and destroyers of democracy never had to answer questions about whether they too had made mistakes or even committed crimes: on the contrary, theirs was a fascism in competition with Nazism and Hitler, and so after 1945 the Austrofascists were suddenly resistance fighters and anti-fascists. While the Nazis were "re-educated", they could bring their ideology with them uninterrupted into the re-established Austrian republic.

While the re-evaluation of their values became compulsory for the Nazis, the Austrofascists could content themselves with rewording. Their fascism was now called "patriotism" and the word "clerical" in their political programmes was replaced by the nicer "Christian".

This fascism could be accepted as innocent in society's consciousness, because it was against Hitler after all and today more so than ever. It doesn't need to fall back on old symbols, because today, for it, everything can become a symbol of patriotism, love as much as hate, sentimentality with respect to Austrian nature in every sense, as well as the brutal exclusion of foreigners, social losers and other "parasites". It needs no recourse to the old programmes, because it can live them here and now in contemporary form; it has nothing against parliament, whose rights it can curtail or cripple for example through parliamentary regulations. It has nothing against a democratic constitution, because from one issue to the next it is in a position to organise a majority to infringe the constitution, even if it is only with the trick of declaring contradiction of the constitution itself constitutional and so avoiding the jurisdiction of the constitutional court.

Homemade fascism was turned into *Fasching*, a carnival, a party, a self-exaltation. And at the same time, as the almost ontologically felt distinguishing mark of the Austrian cross-breed, there was a sentimental, straight-laced pride in "the way we are" — as if there had been no becoming.

There's a simple logic to Jörg Haider increasing his share of the vote from one election to the next. His slick "Austria first!" patriotism harvested what had been sown in the postwar reconstruction of the Austrian Republic. And it is altogether logical that, once Haider's party had reached a sufficient size, there was going to be a coalition between the modern Austrofascists and the successor party to the old Austrofascists. The coalition of ÖVP (Austrian People's Party) and FPÖ (Austrian Freedom Party) was the true Austria on the basis of an Austrian ideology, which before Jörg Haider came onto the scene was endorsed by everyone. And criticism of this coalition was — guess what! — unpatriotic, internationalist, anti-Austrian.

The blindness of Haider-critical Austria

Social Democrats and Greens made two disastrous mistakes. They certainly suspected fascism in Haider, but they didn't understand it correctly. They could only identify Haider's closeness to Nazi thought, the remnants of ideas from the parental home, but not what he had long ago really and effectively come closer to. It became an automatic response to shout "Nazi! Nazi" as a warning at every opportunity, which didn't, however, make any of his voters stop and think and couldn't persuade them to change their views. Because they weren't Nazis, and with some justification did not see themselves as Nazis and could not understand why Haider and they, as his voters, were supposed to be Nazis — they were only "patriots" after all, aggressive "patriots" but, according to the existing consensus, innocent ones.

Thus, the Austria that was critical of Haider was unable to see that the danger wasn't Haider at all, but Wolfgang Schüssel. The modern, impudent Austrofascism needed the old, stale Austrofascism, but one which had turned democratic, in order to form a majority consecrated by the state, in order, under the slogan "modernisation of Austria", to be able to properly lash out at the "red scroungers", the "foulers of the own nest", the foreigners.

In the ÖVP the right man at the right time was waiting. Under Schüssel's predecessor, Eberhard Busek, it would not yet have been possible, under Schüssel's successor, Wolfgang Molterer, only perhaps, and under Erwin Pröll² not at all. Wolfgang Schüssel was the danger; only he could turn Haider's cheeky—contrary, anti—authoritarian—authoritarian Austrofascism into definitively Austrian state policy. (The hard economic interests that the ÖVP concealed behind that is a story in itself.) And the Social Democrats, Greens and the critical Austrian intelligentsia were not prepared.

Their second mistake was not to understand the difference between critique and the conclusions one draws from it. Much that Haider brutally criticised was indeed worth criticising. No one can be successful politically without addressing topics that concern people, who does not battle or appear to battle against a situation under which many suffer or are irritated by. The difference between parties, after all, is constituted by what consequences are drawn from the criticisms made, what solutions one proposes.

Haider's talent was that he rightly questioned a great deal and then was credible, even when he gave the wrong answers. But for all those who rejected Haider's views, it became self—evident, automatic, to criticise and reject his criticism, as if anti—fascism simply proved itself by doggedly defending what a fascist criticised, instead of oneself proposing more sensible solutions. For decades, for example, the leftwing intelligentsia had criticised the extensive government role of the social partners in Austria.³ However, when Jörg Haider directly attacked social partnership, leftwing intellectuals in a reflex response began to defend it.

That produced a schizophrenia that made matter—of—fact discussions impossible. Haider drew support because he criticised what many were criticising; his opponents lost support because, in part against their better judgment, they defended it. If Haider had said that two times two is four, the anti—fascists would have invented a new mathematics. If he had declared the fight against climate change a condition of forming a coalition, the Greens would have demanded coal power stations.

The genie in the bottle

As a result of this shared culpability, more of Austria's political culture was destroyed than to all appearances had been built up. Haider's success and the failure in confronting him have created a political climate in which only a populist patriotism seems possible, and where political differences are defined only in terms of whether the populist is popular or not. Wolfgang Schüssel, the prototype of the populist who isn't popular, was himself defeated by the genie he let out of the bottle. As we can see today, he didn't "tame" Haider; he thought he would play with Haider but in fact he didn't measure up to him.

Conversely, political thinking in Austria was devastated in that now anyone who formulates political goals that meet with broad popular approval is immediately denounced as a populist. That is Werner Faymann's problem.⁴ But unfortunately not only his.

Haider is dead. And we all have to live with him.

¹ The Social Democratic leader and Austrian chancellor 1970–1983 — trans.

² Current ÖVP leader — trans.

- ³ Corporatist system of labour and industrial relations in Austria, heavily criticized for its lack of public accountability — trans.
- ⁴ Werner Faymann, leader of the Austrian Social Democratic Party, charged with forming a government after the startling electoral gains of the Far Right at the September 2008 election — trans.

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