

L. Faust, *Neofaschismus in Italien. Politik, Familie, Religion in Rom. Eine Ethnographie*. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2021, pp. 364

Lene Faust's ethnography explores both the pain thresholds of European memory cultures and ethnographic research possibilities. In the prologue, she feels her way across the stumbling blocks of memory on Berlin and Roman streets, and moves across the «remnants of the fascist past, the so-called *fascio littorio* [...] which still bears witness to a grim past on many Roman manhole covers» (Faust 2021: 11, translation by the author). If she is familiar with the painful and much resisted coming to terms with war, trauma and the perpetrator's past from Germany, the so called historic *Aufarbeitung*, for which in Italian no word exists, in her ethnography she approaches a context in which the anti-fascist narrative has delayed the coming to terms with Italian perpetration for decades and is currently only tentatively being broken through by historical research (*Ivi*: 146ff.). It is against this background that the significance of her doctoral thesis *In the Name of the Dead*, which was awarded the Research Promotion Prize of the Frankfurt Frobenius Institute and deals with neo-fascist memory practices in Roman *ambiente*, can be understood. *Ambiente* refers to the Italian neo-fascists' political and social network, which is branched out all over Italy (*Ivi*: 29). What is unique about Lene Faust's work is that she approaches the perpetrators of the anti-fascist discourse of memory not through a political discourse but through her entry into the world of the perpetrators, through the conversations she has with three generations of fascist subculture: «I moved in their world, thinking their thoughts, allowing myself to understand and empathise» (*Ivi*: 17). In her methodological reflection, she does not refer to Gingrich's (2004) discussion of the problematic nature of ethnographic fieldwork with right-wing extremist groups, in which he sees the methodological challenge in an extremely reserved ethnographic empathy, and in the need to adopt a skeptical and critical distance at all levels. Lene Faust's ethnographic approach is well aware of this tension, but nevertheless remains ethnographically empathetic without ever risking slipping from understanding into comprehension. Her ethnographic experiences are made accessible in detailed excerpts from the field diary and are embedded in a careful review of the relevant literature. She sets out the theoretical framework by referring to political philosophy, psycholo-

gical trauma research and Italian contemporary historical research and, in her comprehensive reference to the anthropological literature, provides a good overview of the ethnological research debate on the topics of memory, death, religion and ritual alongside dense ethnographic description. Against the background of its ethnographic data, the work is divided into the following broad themes: Postwar Fascism in Time and Space; Families, Traumas, Perpetration; Cult of the Dead and Religious Elements. To anticipate: this work demonstrates par excellence what ethnography can achieve, namely to lead to a deeper understanding of culturally (and politically) foreign, in this case sometimes threatening, worlds through participatory research. For at the end of the book, the reader finds herself with a hitherto taboo question, namely how a dialogue between fascist and anti-fascist cultures of memory could be conducted. Without ever bowing to the fascist ductus or even, as some of her informants demand of her, becoming an advocate of the fascist movement through the book, Lene Faust succeeds in an impressive way in revealing the cultural logic of fascist everyday practice, fascist culture of memory and rituals.

According to Lene Faust, the core of fascist memory culture must be seen in the ritualised commemoration of the dead. The collective hero narrative of the RSI (Repubblica Sociale Italiana) veterans; the hero narrative of the second generation from the *anni di piombo*; as well as the vehement efforts of the third generation to remember in an exemplary manner, since they cannot point to any (heroic) deaths of their own, are expressed, among other things, in the *presente*. *Il presente*, as the rite of the cult of the dead is called, was introduced as a military ritual during the First World War. The introduction of the ritual ensured the physical discipline of soldiers, who were kept under control against a background of increased levels of traumatisation in an increasingly mechanised war. A soldierly practice of torpor (*Ivi*: 125). In the *presente*, the names of the fallen soldiers are called out by the soldiers present; this practice continues to this day in the neo-fascist rite. An essential part of the ritual is the military tight posture and the calling of the deceased names. In the ritual of the *presente*, the «sacred bond between the living and the dead» is manifested to this day; the *presente* is «a component of every funeral, memorial or remembrance ceremony, culminating in the masses for the dead in honour of the fallen soldiers from the Second World War and the political dead of the *anni di piombo*» (*Ivi*: 126, translation by the author). For the neo-fascist *ambiente*, the *presente* is considered the only true religious ceremony whose ritualised

physicality brings about a transformation of the collective: «a messy *piazza* [...] full of people forms itself into a troupe, physical unity blurs the boundaries between individuals. A single body emerges, as it were, ready to fight in common memory of the dead» (*Ibidem*, translation by the author). Lene Faust shows how the positive reference back to this military ritual not only strengthens the present collective, but also covers up Mussolini's military failure (*Ibidem*). In the detailed ethnographic description of a *presente* for the dead of the first generation (*Ivi*: 129ff.), the anthropologists' individual interlocutors become visible as an aggressive male collective; moreover, it becomes apparent how the Italian state and the Catholic Church deal with the neo-fascist ritual practice. Before the ritual of the *presente* takes place on the Campo della memoria in Rome, all church and state representatives leave the place. After a year of field research, the anthropologist herself is advised by some informants not to take part in the ritual. She decides to stay.

The neo-fascist *ambiente* focuses a large part of its memory and rituals on the fascist dead, whose official recognition by anti-fascist post-war Italy is denied. «The common goal [of official recognition of the fascist dead] keeps the social fabric together despite numerous differences, a source of energy and motivation for the community and for political mobilisation» (*Ivi*: 281 translation by the author). The non-recognition of the fascist dead, despite individual revisionist achievements during the governing coalition between Forza Italia and Alleanza nazionale in the 1990s, leads to unrest in the *ambiente* and structures, the collective. «[...] it is the restlessness of the fascists, who see themselves as homeless [...] that discharges itself in the memory of the "undead"» (*Ibidem*, translation by the author).

Lene Faust shows how the neo-fascist subculture in Italy is fed by its own myth of origin of the pure, moral inviolability as soldiers in the sense of Mary Douglas, whose perpetration and war crimes are relativised or negated. The neo-fascist hero narrative and self-victimisation oppose the anti-fascist perpetrator discourse of the Italian Resistenza and post-war society. Thus, the neo-fascist Italian families of the first, second and third generation of different social origins and education see themselves connected in the subcultural network of war losers. War traumas, perpetration and guilt are negated and tabooed in the families and in the network: «The emotional content of the war legacy, which is shifted unprocessed in families, has an effect on the political space via the political actionism of individuals: fascist politics since 1945 is thus also a political implementa-

tion and commissioning of family traumas resulting from a willingness to use violence and perpetration» (*Ivi*: 237, translation by the author).

The ethnography *Neo-Fascismus in Italien* introduces us to a social and political network of marginal extremist groups described by the anthropologist as a cultural space where fascist culture, moral principles, culture of memory as well as commemoration of the dead are cultivated. These extremist groups have recently resurfaced with vigour in contemporary Italian society and whose media coverage is probably greater than their actual numerical permanence. Reading this work is recommended to anyone interested in a candid look at perpetrators and in understanding an extremist network that exists in the midst of our world.

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## References

- Gingrich, A. 2004. Concepts of Race Vanishing, Movements of Racisms Rising? Global Issues and Austrian Ethnography. *Ethnos*, 69: 156-176.