



BRILL

FASCISM 11 (2022) 339–341

F A S C I S M

JOURNAL
OF
COMPARATIVE
FASCIST
STUDIES

brill.com/fasc

Conference Report



Beyond the Paranoid Style—Fascism, Radical Right and the Myth of Conspiracy

*Fifth Convention of the International Association for Comparative Fascist
Studies (COMFAS)*

Paul Jackson | ORCID: 0000-0003-4733-5679

University of Northampton, Northampton, UK

Paul.Jackson@northampton.ac.uk

Abstract

Following two years of online events, from the 14 to 16 September 2022 the fifth annual Convention of the International Association for Comparative Fascist Studies (COMFAS) took place in Florence. The title of the conference ‘Beyond the Paranoid Style: Fascism, Radical Right and the Myth of Conspiracy’ presented a framework for a wide variety of reflections that were both historically grounded and timely. After all, in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, many scholars have had new experiences of the impact of conspiracy theory thinking.

Keywords

COMFAS – far right – fascism – conspiracy theories – conference report

Following two years of online events, from the 14 to 16 September 2022 the fifth annual Convention of the International Association for Comparative Fascist Studies (COMFAS) took place in Florence. Hosted by the University of Florence,

and expertly co-organised by Marco Bresciani and Fulvio Conti (University of Florence), Francesco Cassata (University of Genoa), and Constantin Iordachi, the director of COMFAS, the event was a resounding success. Aside from many expert sessions, members and associates of COMFAS were able to gather, talk informally, and discuss their work in ways that two virtual events in 2020 and 2021 have inevitably hampered.

The title of the conference, 'Beyond the Paranoid Style: Fascism, Radical Right and the Myth of Conspiracy', echoed Richard Hofstadter's classic essay, and presented a framework for a wide variety of reflections that were both historically grounded and timely. After all, in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, many scholars have had new experiences of the impact of conspiracy theory thinking, for some in terms of the material they work on and in some cases in terms of personal encounters as well. The event began with Paul Hanebrink and Marla Stone delivering two expert keynote talks. These examined, respectively, aspects of 'Judeo-Bolshevist' tropes in conspiracy thinking throughout the twentieth century and representations of communism in fascist conspiracies.

These talks set the standard for two further days of complex debate and discussion. Panels spanned three to five experts and typically consisted of a strong mix of subject specialists with an international profile and PhD and early career scholars presenting a wide range of new material. One of the strengths of the COMFAS network has been its support for emerging scholars, and this conference was no exception. Several panels focused on aspects of fascism in the interwar years, as well as representations of fascist conspiracist culture during the Second World War. There were also panels dedicated to specific regions, including Northern Europe and Scandinavia, as well as Spain and Portugal and South-Eastern Europe. Papers in these sessions developed a range of disciplinary considerations as well.

Importantly, the nature of more recent variants of fascist conspiracy theories were also addressed. This included a panel focused on the 'great replacement' concept that covered issues such as leadership styles, terrorism, street marching groups and the online realm. A final panel examined aspects of conspiracy theories related to Vladimir Putin's war in Ukraine and responses to it. These discussions allowed the conference to draw out historical parallels with current concerns and highlighted the ongoing relevance of studying the fascist past. Questions raised by such contemporary-focused discussions included: how should social media be studied? In what ways can ethnography help us understand the appeal of conspiracy theories? And how effectively do conspiracies appeal to people as ways to make sense of contexts that appear out of control?

The event featured several important plenary discussions as well. An animated debate at the end of the second day focused on the ways scholars should respond to the issue of present-day conspiracy theories, often rooted in echoes of the fascist past. Some contributors expressed the need to challenge the pernicious impact of conspiracy theories today as public intellectuals; others reflected on the inevitability of conspiracy theory thinking as part of the human condition and so were, and are, inescapable. The nature of religious belief and its analogies to conspiracy theories was also touched on, as was the issue of the emotional as well as rational appeal of conspiracy theories, and ways they mobilise emotions.

Some lasting themes in need of more detailed consideration in the wake of the conference included questions about what conspiracy theories 'do' for people, and how they are perceived as empowering; further consideration of ways in which interdisciplinary scholarly approaches are needed to analyse conspiracy theories more completely; and finally, greater attention of the affective aspect of conspiracy theories and their ongoing relevance. For those concerned with the study of fascism, conspiracy theories have always been a central component of the phenomenon. The fifth annual COMFAS convention highlighted the vibrancy found in the ongoing work of a wide range of scholars who engage with this issue.

Finally, the conference allowed for the important relationship between COMFAS and *Fascism: Journal of Comparative Fascist Studies* to be reiterated. New Editor-in-Chief of *Fascism*, Bàrbara Molas, explained the significance of COMFAS for the success of the journal, while Aristotle Kallis was formally announced as joining Constantin Iordachi in directing COMFAS. Craig Fowley from Routledge was another important presence, promoting the work of the Routledge Studies in Fascism and the Far Right book series to conference attendees. In future years, COMFAS intends to develop its website (www.comfas.org) and expand its network, while future annual conventions aim to focus on important topics such as gender and fascism. This important community of scholars will continue to enrich the work of those focused on the history and contemporary dynamics of fascism.