

# Fascism 2.0: Twitter Users' Social Media Memories of Hitler on his 127<sup>th</sup> Birthday

*Christian Fuchs*

Westminster Institute for Advanced Studies, Communication and Media  
Research Institute, University of Westminster  
*c.fuchs@westminster.ac.uk*

## Abstract

This article analyses how Twitter users communicated about Hitler on his 127<sup>th</sup> birthday. It employs an empirical critique informed by critical Marxist theories of fascism. The analysis is based on a dataset of 4,193 tweets that were posted on 20 April 2016, and that used hashtags such as #Hitler, #AdolfHitler, #HappyBirthdayAdolf, #Happy-BirthdayHitler. The results provide indications about how fascism 2.0 works. There are various strategies that fascism 2.0 uses, such as online authoritarianism, online nationalism, an online friend-enemy scheme, and online patriarchy and naturalism. The growth of fascism 2.0 is a consequence of a 'fascism-producing' crisis of society that requires adequate anti-fascist responses and strategies.

## Keywords

fascism 2.0 – critical theory of fascism – Adolf Hitler – social media – Twitter – memory – popular culture

Hitler was born on 20 April 1889. In 1939, on Hitler's fiftieth birthday, the day became a bank holiday in Nazi Germany. After 1945, the day remained of huge symbolic importance for fascist groups and movements. So, for example in 2016, the right-wing group *Thügida*, a group associated with the German *Pegida* movement, organised a torch march in the German city of Jena. In 2008, around one thousand ultras fans of the Austrian football team Rapid Wien gathered in Vienna's city centre to celebrate Hitler's birthday. They had, for example, a banner that read 'Happy Birthday 18'. '18' stands symbolically for Adolf

Hitler's initials AH. German neo-Nazis celebrated Hitler's birthday in 1991 in a Berlin club, arguing: 'This is the day, where one can say "Foreigners out!"... We now go out and when we see some foreigners, then we beat them up! This is our day!'¹ European neo-Nazis in 1984 founded the Committee for the Preparation of the Festivities for Adolf Hitler's one hundredth birthday.

Remembering Hitler and the Nazis-regime's crimes on social media also stands in the context of a shift in the memory of Hitler and Nazism in popular culture.<sup>2</sup> Whereas in the decades after the Second World War, serious forms of commemoration such as museums, memorials, ceremonies and documentaries dominated, since the 1990s a radical shift has occurred: Hitler has now become a source of entertainment in films, novels, short stories, comics, theatre, music culture, satire, fashion, pornography, advertisements, artworks, and on the internet. Stiglegger speaks in this context of the emergence of Nazi chic and Nazi trash.<sup>3</sup> For Rosenfeld, these developments are an expression of the normalisation of the Nazi past which threatens to overturn the 'perceived exceptionality of the Nazi era'.<sup>4</sup>

The internet's possibilities for the convergence of production and consumption (user-generated content, 'participatory' culture) and the global distribution of information have certainly enhanced the possibilities of Hitler 'becoming' popular culture. Online examples include internet memes (Disco Hitler, Advice Hitler, Hi Hitler, the section Hitler on memegenerator.net, etc.), web sites (hipsterhitler.com, catsthatlooklikehitler.com, thingsthatlooklikehitler.com, etc.), video games (Sim Heil, Six Degrees of Hitler, etc.), YouTube videos (Downfall, Hitler Gets a Report on His Death, Hitler Disco, Hitler is the Scatman, Ich hock' in meinem Boncker, Hitler Sings: Born to Be Alive!, etc.), online language and puns ("lolcaust", "Rebeccacaust", etc.). Difficult questions have emerged: Is it morally acceptable to laugh about Hitler? Does popular Hitler culture and Hitler humour automatically turn the Nazi legacy into an 'empty signifier'<sup>5</sup> with Hitler turned from a symbol of evil into a symbol of humour? Does Hitler in popular culture deny the singularity of the Shoah and trivialise it? Can there be forms of popular cultural engagement with Nazism that foster anti-fascism? There are no straightforward answers to such questions.

1 'Vor 20 Jahren: Rechte feiern Hitlers Geburtstag,' *Spiegel TV Magazine*, April 18, 2011, accessed May 2, 2016, <http://www.spiegel.de/video/vor-20-jahren-rechte-feiern-hitlers-geburtstag-video-1106162.html>.

2 Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, *Hi Hitler! How the Nazi Past is Being Normalized in Contemporary Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

3 Marcus Stiglegger, *Nazi-Chic und Nazi-Trash: Faschistische Ästhetik in der populären Kultur* (Berlin: Bertz + Fischer, 2011).

4 Rosenfeld, *Hi Hitler!*, 7.

5 *Ibid.*, 341.

This article first outlines the study's methodology, then presents the major results (organised in four sections), and finally draws conclusions.

## Methodology

This study deploys an empirical Marxist ideology critique as method for studying how Twitter users celebrated Hitler's 127<sup>th</sup> birthday on 20 April 2016. The approach taken stands in the tradition of Karl Marx,<sup>6</sup> Georg Lukács,<sup>7</sup> and the Frankfurt School.<sup>8</sup> What these approaches have in common is that they understand and study ideology as semiotic structures and practices that justify one group's or individual's power, domination or exploitation of other groups or individuals by misrepresenting, one-dimensionally presenting or distorting reality in symbolic representations.<sup>9</sup>

Marxist ideology critique analyses the text of ideologies in their political-economic context in order to inform prospects for progressive social change. It wants to understand the semiotic, linguistic, communicative, cultural and mediated ways used for expressing social reality in manners that justify domination in the light of how capitalism and state power are changing and what political-economic changes those who express such ideologies desire. Ideology critique is therefore not just a critique of ideologies, but also a critique of the political and economic interests that ideologies represent.

Marxist ideology critique is related to, but not identical to Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA is a body of approaches that study discourse, power, language and ideology.<sup>10</sup> Marx and Marxist theory have influenced some, but not all CDA approaches.<sup>11</sup> There is also no common understanding of ideology in CDA.<sup>12</sup> So, on the one hand, there are approaches in CDA that are sceptical of Marx and Marxism. For example Teun van Dijk argues that the approach 'initiated by Marx, focused on the more or less deterministic influence of social

6 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1845).

7 Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (London: Merlin, 1971 [1923]).

8 Jan Rehmann, *Theories of Ideology* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), Chapter 4.

9 Christian Fuchs, *Culture and Economy in the Age of Social Media* (New York: Routledge, 2015), Chapter 3.

10 For an overview, see: Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, ed., *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*, second edition (London: Sage, 2009).

11 Wodak and Meyer, *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*, 20.

12 Christian Fuchs, 'Red Scare 2.0: User-Generated Ideology in the Age of Jeremy Corbyn and Social Media,' *Journal of Language and Politics* 15 (2016).

class on knowledge and more generally on thoughts or ideas'.<sup>13</sup> However, the claim that Marx had a deterministic understanding of ideology disregards that for Marx, materialism does not mean that thought, ideas, worldviews and ideologies can be read off the economy. Marx also does not say that ideas are immaterial. For him, materialism means that they are social products, i.e. produced by humans in the social relations taking place in society. This is why he stresses that ideas must be seen in the context of 'their real relations and activities, of their production, of their intercourse, of their social and political conduct'.<sup>14</sup> Norman Fairclough in contrast to Teun van Dijk argues that critical linguistics and CDA 'have both been shaped by Marxism'<sup>15</sup> and reads Marx as being a 'critical discourse theorist *avant la lettre*'.<sup>16</sup>

In conducting this study, I first gathered relevant data from Twitter. On 23 April 2016, I used hashtagify.me in order to obtain hashtags related to #Hitler, #AdolfHitler and #HappyBirthdayAdolf. This allowed me to identify the major hashtags having to do with Hitler that were used around the time of his 2016 birthday. I used the tool Texifter in order to obtain all tweets from 20 April 2016 that mentioned any of the following hashtags: #hitler OR #adolphytler OR #hitlerday OR #1488 OR #AdolfHitlerDay OR #HeilHitler OR #SiegHeil OR #HappyBirthdayAdolf OR #HitlerNation OR #HappyBirthdayHitler OR #HitlersBirthday OR #MakeGermanyGreatAgain OR #WeMissYouHitler. The search resulted in 4,193 tweets that were automatically imported into Discovertext, from where I exported them along with meta-data into a csv file. Second, I analysed the language and visuals of all tweets by focusing on the way they describe, symbolise, name and display opponents and what kind of arguments they use. Third, I contextualised the tweets by relating them to elements of a broader worldview, i.e. the question what kind of society they imagine. In this context, the Marxist/critical theory of fascism plays a key role. The contextualisation made use of this theory in order to interpret how language and visuals used on Twitter express elements of fascist ideology. Fourth, I reflected on the practical consequences for anti-fascist politics.

Social media analysis often either ignore or fetishise questions of research ethics.<sup>17</sup> One extreme is that social media researchers simply completely ignore

13 Teun van Dijk, *Discourse and Knowledge: A Sociocognitive Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 141.

14 Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, 41.

15 Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* (Harlow: Longman, 2010), 304.

16 Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis*, 340.

17 Michael Zimmer and Nicholas John Proferes, 'A Topology of Twitter Research: Disciplines, Methods, and Ethics,' *Aslib Journal of Information Management* 66, no. 3 (2014): 250–261.

ethical questions. Another extreme is a form of internet research ethics that wants to prescribe obtaining informed consent for every piece of data one collects online, which can censor critical studies. A critical-realist approach is to engage with research ethics and apply its principles to a feasible extent. In the study at hand, I used a recommendation by the British Psychological Society which argues that online observation should only take place when and where users ‘reasonably expect to be observed by strangers’.<sup>18</sup> The use of a hashtag about Hitler and Hitler’s birthday communicates information to the public. Such users therefore expect to be observed by strangers. In such cases, obtaining informed consent is not appropriate. I do not mention any usernames in this article.

For the purpose of studying ‘fascism 2.0’, one needs an understanding of what fascism is. Taking a purely historiographical approach in defining fascism that only associates fascism with Hitler and Mussolini, risks underestimating the possibility that certain political systems can emerge under different historical contexts. Daniel Woodley<sup>19</sup> discusses basic elements of a critical theory of fascism. Based on the work of Marx and Moishe Postone,<sup>20</sup> he connects fascism to the fetishism concept. He argues that fascism is ‘a populist ideology which seeks, through a mythology of unity and identity, to project a “common instinctual fate” (uniform social status) between bourgeois and proletarianized groups, eliding the reality of social distinction in differentiated class societies.’<sup>21</sup> Fascism is an ideology that not just shapes the worldviews of fascist individuals and movements, but is also a form of political praxis aimed at creating a particular model of society:

[F]ascism must *itself* be understood as a political commodity: fascism is not simply a subjectively generated, reactive strategy – a desperate attempt by atomized individuals to overcome the disenchantment and inauthenticity of modernity – but an aesthetic innovation which transcends existing patterns of differentiation and political subjectification to disrupt established narratives of history and progress . . . the fetishization

18 British Psychological Society (BPS), *Code of Ethics and Conduct* (Leicester: BPS, 2009), 13.

19 Daniel Woodley, *Fascism and Political Theory: Critical Perspectives on Fascist Ideology* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010).

20 Moishe Postone, ‘The Holocaust and the Trajectory of the Twentieth Century,’ in *Catastrophe and Meaning: The Holocaust and the Twentieth Century*, ed. Moishe Postone and Eric Santner (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 81–114; Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx’s Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Moishe Postone, ‘Anti-Semitism and National Socialism: Notes on the German Reaction to “Holocaust”’, *New German Critique* 19, no. 1 (1980): 97–115.

21 Woodley, *Fascism and Political Theory*, 17.

of communal identities which conceal the true nature of the commodity as a structured social practice, bridging the gap between the specificity of the nation-state (as the nexus linking culture and power) and the rationalization of circuits of capital.<sup>22</sup>

Based on a critical theory of fascism, one can therefore identify four broad elements of fascism: 1) Authoritarian populism guided by the leadership principle; 2) Nationalism; 3) Friend-enemy scheme; 4) Patriarchy and naturalism.<sup>23</sup>

### Fascism 2.0's First Element: Leadership Ideology and Authoritarian Populism

Charismatic leadership and authoritarian political structures form a first element of fascism. Fascism tends to erode the distinction between the state and society. The state is seen as being everything and everywhere. Fascist ideology penetrates all spheres of life. The state is defined as being coextensive with the political leader. Absolute obedience to the leader is demanded. There is no legal political opposition. Not just political parties and social movements not associated with the leader and his party are banned, but also political organisations of the working class such as trade unions are outlawed.

Theodor W. Adorno stresses the importance of leadership in fascist ideology. Hitler presented himself as a 'threatening authority'.<sup>24</sup> Psychology plays an important role in the fascist attempt to make individuals believe in, collectively project their selves into and follow the Führer. 'It is precisely this idealization of himself which the fascist leader tries to promote in his followers, and which is helped by the *Führer* ideology.'<sup>25</sup> Collective narcissism is an underlying psychological process of fascism. The leader image results in the 'enlargement of the subject: by making the leader his ideal he loves himself, as it were, but gets rid of the stains of frustration and discontent which mar his picture of his own empirical self.'<sup>26</sup> 'The narcissistic *gain* provided by fascist propaganda

22 Ibid., 17–18.

23 For a detailed model of right-wing-authoritarianism, authoritarian capitalism, right-wing extremism and fascism that is built on the four mentioned dimensions and how these aspects are communicated on social media, see: Christian Fuchs, *Digital Demagogue: Authoritarian Capitalism in the Age of Trump and Twitter* (London: Pluto, 2018).

24 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda,' in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1951), 132–157, 137.

25 Adorno, 'Freudian Theory', 140.

26 Ibid.



FIGURE 1  
*The fascist aesthetic of Hitler birthday culture on Twitter (No. 189)*

is obvious.<sup>27</sup> Hitler presented himself at the same time as superman and ordinary, a 'great little man.'<sup>28</sup> This 'unity trick'<sup>29</sup> tries to construct unity within the fascist community in order to preach hatred against out-groups such as Jews and socialists.

The leadership principle was found in the analysed Twitter dataset in five different forms. A first way of how admiration for Hitler's leadership was expressed on Twitter was by associating Hitler and Nazi symbols with birthday culture, including coffee, cake and cookies. The tweet 'Wake and bake #HitlersBirthday #420' (No. 2984) was by far the most liked and re-tweeted post in the analysed dataset. It was posted by a neo-Nazi account devoted to Hitler that has around 408,000 followers.<sup>30</sup> The account describes itself as 'Destroyin' pussy and Jews'. Figures 1 to 3 show three more examples of how Hitler was combined with birthday culture.

Admiration for Hitler is expressed by the superlative 'the greatest leader of the 20<sup>th</sup> century' and by referring to him by his first name 'Adolf': Two of the tweets speak of 'Happy birthday Adolf' (figures 1 and 3). The cake shown in figure 3 says in German 'Happy birthday, Adolf' and expresses fascist aesthetic by using the symbols of the SS and the Swastika. The cake's colours furthermore imitate the red, white and black of the Nazi Party's so-called Blood Flag. The formulation 'Hitler was right' expresses agreement with Hitler's politics of annihilation and imperialism. The use of images that show Hitler's image in a cup of coffee's milk froth, Swastika cookies, a Swastika cake, and Hitler

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>30</sup> Accessed on May 3, 2016.

Happy Birthday to the greatest leader of the 20th Century! #420 #HappyBirthdayHitler



RETWEETS 40 LIKES 66

FIGURE 2

*The fascist aesthetic of Hitler birthday culture on Twitter (No. 456)*

My mother [redacted] made an awesome cake to celebrate Adolf's birthday, #HappyBirthdayHitler



RETWEETS 7 LIKES 18

FIGURE 3

*The fascist aesthetic of Hitler birthday culture on Twitter (No. 1605)*

demanding like an anxious child 'Where is my cake!', downplay and trivialise the horrors of Nazism by visual and linguistic means.

The historian Wolfgang Benz<sup>31</sup> writes that the Nazi regime resulted in more than fifty million dead people, including six million Jews, who were the victims of a systematic, industrialised extermination campaign. Jonathan Friedman, Professor and Director of Holocaust and Genocide Studies at West Chester University, argues that the Nazi regime also resulted in the killing of 'several hundred thousand Roma-Sinti, two million Polish civilians, three million Soviet prisoners of war, several thousand gay men and Jehovah's Witnesses, tens of

31 Wolfgang Benz, *Geschichte des Dritten Reiches* (München: Beck, 2000), 264.



thousands of political prisoners, and 200,000 persons with disabilities. Never before had a government and its operating ideology grouped these disparate European outcasts together as part of a program of persecution.' Estimates of the murdered Roma and Sinti vary between 150,000 and 1.5 million.<sup>32</sup>

Hitler's name is intrinsically associated with these victims and the Nazi politics of extermination, war and enslavement. Birthday cakes and parties imply happiness and are symbols of celebration. Celebrating Hitler's birthday symbolically celebrates the barbarity of his regime and thereby trivialises it.

Figure 2 is an internet meme. Such combinations of text and image can be generated with tools such as Imgur, MemeGenerator, ImgFlip, or LiveMeme. According to Richard Dawkins, a meme is an idea that spreads in culture. It 'propagate[s] itself, spreading from brain to brain.'<sup>33</sup> Internet memes are a digital subculture associated with sites such as 4chan,<sup>34</sup> Tumblr<sup>35</sup> and Reddit.<sup>36,37</sup> Image macros are one genre of internet meme:<sup>38</sup> They combine an image (usually of a person) and some text in order to express a specific cynical, ironic, sarcastic, satirical or parodistic meaning. Graham Meikle stresses the practical aspect of sharing memes and defines internet memes as 'shared, rule-based representations of online interactions that are not only adopted, but also adapted by others.'<sup>39</sup> For Shifman, internet memes are connected digital content units that are 'circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users.'<sup>40</sup>

The meme that depicts Hitler as a child protesting that he wants to have 'mein cake', plays with the public perception of children as innocent, pure, ingenuous, unspoiled, and original. The constructed child-like behaviour makes Hitler look sympathetic and apolitical. Such constructions distract attention from the historical results of Nazism. Shifman argues that internet memes

32 Jonathan Friedman, ed. *The Routledge History of the Holocaust* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 381.

33 Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, new edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 192.

34 4chan is a simple image-based bulletin board where anyone can post comments and share images, '4chan', accessed October 31, 2017, <http://www.4chan.org/>.

35 Tumblr is a microblogging and social networking website, 'Tumblr', accessed October 31, 2017, <https://www.tumblr.com/>.

36 Reddit is an American social news aggregation, web content rating, and discussion website, 'Reddit', accessed October 31, 2017, <https://www.reddit.com/>.

37 Limor Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2014), 118.

38 Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*, Chapter 7.

39 Graham Meikle, *Social Media: Communication, Sharing and Visibility* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 55.

40 Shifman, *Memes in Digital Culture*, 177.

enable participatory culture and that they 'expand the range of participatory options in democracies: citizens can express their political opinions in new and accessible ways, engage in heated debates, and enjoy the process to boot.'<sup>41</sup> Often overlooked is the fact that social media is not just a realm of progressive politics, but also one of 'participatory fascism', in which users generate symbols that depict, propagate, or trivialise fascism. Given that fascism is opposed to participatory democracy, it can in fact never be participatory-democratic. Fascism mobilises the masses by the leadership cult. Fascist mass mobilisations bring together demagogic power from above and hegemonic power from below. Democracy is one of fascism's main enemies. The terms *user-generated fascism* or *fascism 2.0* are more appropriate than 'participatory fascism'. In the tweet shown in figure 1, the fascist message and downplaying of Nazism's horror is underpinned by calling Hitler the 'greatest leader of the 20<sup>th</sup> century'.

A second way, in which Hitler was presented as leader in the analysed dataset, was by foregrounding the claim that he was a strong political figure. Figures 4, 5 and 6 show examples. Ian Kershaw, author of the most widely read biography of Hitler,<sup>42</sup> argues that the specificity of Nazism was not Hitler's personality, but the form of rule that he and the Nazis embodied.<sup>43</sup> Kershaw based on Max Weber's theory<sup>44</sup> argues that Nazism's uniqueness is the combination of 'Hitler's "charismatic authority"', the Führer cult and myth, 'and the promise of national salvation.'<sup>45</sup> It aimed at 'racial nationalism and imperialism',<sup>46</sup> the Shoah and a world war, and used the most modern state and military apparatus for executing its ideology. The core points of Hitler's ideology were: "removal of the Jews". . .; attaining "living space" to secure Germany's future (a notion vague enough to encompass different strands of expansionism); race as the explanation of world history, and eternal struggle as the basic law of human existence.'<sup>47</sup> Franz Neumann shares the analysis that Hitler was a charismatic leader, who was seen as possessing '[s]uperhuman qualities'.<sup>48</sup> Neumann stresses that top-down leadership was not just a principle of the Nazi state, but of all realms of Nazi society. The 'principle of leadership . . . dominates all social

41 Ibid., 144.

42 Ian Kershaw, *Hitler: A Biography* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008).

43 Ian Kershaw, 'Hitler and the Uniqueness of Nazism,' *Journal of Contemporary History* 39, no. 2 (2004): 239–254.

44 Max Weber, *Economy and Society* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978).

45 Kershaw, 'Hitler and the Uniqueness of Nazism,' 246.

46 Ibid., 249.

47 Ibid., 252.

48 Franz Neumann, *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism, 1933–1944* (Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 2009 [1944]), 83–97, 85.



FIGURE 4

*The fascist representation of Hitler as leader on Twitter: 'The 127<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of My Führer' (No. 956)*



FIGURE 5

*The fascist representation of Hitler as leader on Twitter (No. 196)*

and political organizations'.<sup>49</sup> Hitler was 'the leader of the party, the army, and the people'.<sup>50</sup>

The images in figures 4, 5 and 6 evoke the impression of Hitler as God, captain, and driver. Different metaphors are visually employed for stressing Hitler's leadership qualities. Whereas the aura in figure 4 is one of static adoration that

<sup>49</sup> Neuman, *Behemoth*, 83.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 84.

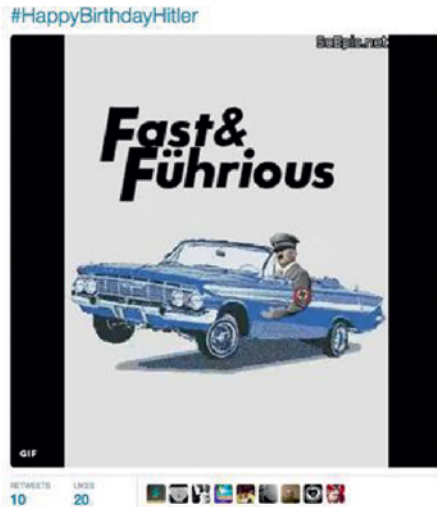


FIGURE 6  
*The fascist representation of Hitler as leader on Twitter (No. 855)*

has religious undertones of constancy, sacredness and eternity, figures 5 and 6 create the impression of movement and change by using the images of a carriage and a car. The idea that the Führer moves society into the right direction is underpinned in figure 6 by the use of an animated image, in which the car bounces up and down. The tweet in figure 4 plays with the idea of Hitler being superhuman and bringing salvation. He is shown as a God-like figure in the centre of the image, surrounded by the symbol of the Imperial Eagle that communicates loyalty and unity. Figure 5 draws a distinction between Stalin as boss and Hitler as leader. It compares Stalinism and Nazism and communicates that Stalin controlled and enslaved wretched masses, whereas it also claims that Hitler was an ordinary German, who was one of the people and worked hard to lead them into the right direction. The tweet also expresses admiration of Hitler by claiming he was ‘truly amazing’. Prefixing the adverb ‘truly’ intensifies the adjective’s connotation.

The concept of charismatic leadership does not necessarily imply an individualistic analysis of fascism. It rather has a social dimension by assuming that citizens follow, legitimate, enable, and support authoritarian rule and in specific social contexts enact its principles and act like small leaders. Max Weber therefore speaks of the connection of a charismatic leader to a charismatic community that is ‘based on an emotional form of communal relationship’.<sup>51</sup> Figures 4 and 5 also visualise the relationship between Hitler as leader and his followers: A mass of anonymous followers expresses their loyalty by practising

<sup>51</sup> Weber, *Economy and Society*, 243.

the Nazi salute. We do not see their faces and bodies, but only their hands, which symbolises the fascist demand for collective uniformity determined by dominant principles. The use of the words *Mein Führer* [My Leader] communicates a close relationship between the leader and the followers that is defined by the imaginative bond of race and nation. Fascism requires an internalisation of authority so that the followers not just see the Führer as one of them, but consider him and the principles he stands for as something they would give their lives for.

The tweet shown in figure 6 uses a popular culture reference to the action movie *The Fast and the Furious* that combines with political mythology. The film's plot is about car racing in New York. The first part was released in 2001, a number of sequels followed. The tweet plays with the transformation of the movie title into *Fast & Führious*. By creating the term 'Führious', it combines the meanings of the German noun *Führer* [leader] and the verb *führen* [to lead, but also: to drive] into an adjective. The image communicates the claim that Hitler not just brought about fast change, but was also highly determined and effective. The car and the motorway play a special role in myths about Nazi Germany: Those who say that Nazism also had good sides tend to bring up the building of motorways and the design of the Volkswagen Beetle as some of the first examples. In a German survey conducted in 2007, 25% of the participants argued that Nazi Germany also had good sides.<sup>52</sup> The German motorways were a frequently mentioned example. The connection of cars and Hitler in the tweet may not be completely arbitrary, but appeals to the cliché that Hitler created jobs and an efficient and effective economy by building motorways and that he made cars affordable.

Hitler appealed to the car industry by giving the opening address to the 1934 International Automobile and Motor-Cycle Exhibition in Berlin, in which he announced tax reliefs for the car industry and a road-building programme.<sup>53</sup> For Hitler, motorways and the mass production of the vw Beetle were populist ideological symbols that stood for what he saw as the opportunities of the German *Volksgemeinschaft* [community of the German people]. Yet the initiative to build a motorway between Hamburg, Frankfurt and Basel (HaFraBa) goes back to 1926 and was not a Nazi idea.<sup>54</sup> The Nazis first opposed this project,

52 'Viele Deutsche sehen Nazi-Zeit teils positive,' *Die Welt Online*, October 17, 2007, accessed December 23, 2016, <https://www.welt.de/politik/article1272668/Viele-Deutsche-sehen-Nazi-Zeit-teils-positiv.html>.

53 Kershaw, *Hitler: A Biography*, 270–272.

54 W. Dick and A. Lichtenberg, 'The Myth of Hitler's Role in Building the Autobahn,' *Deutsche Welle*, August 4, 2012, accessed July 20, 2016, <http://www.dw.com/en/the-myth-of-hitlers-role-in-building-the-autobahn/a-16144981>.

Wir lassen uns heute das Feiern nicht verbieten,  
und ihr? Bei uns ist alles geplant.  
#Adolf #Hitler #20041889

© View translation



FIGURE 7

*Music as means for the fascist celebration of Hitler on Twitter (No. 1006)*

which in 1933 became part of Hitler's plan to build a *Reichsautobahn*. 'Between 1941 and 1942, construction almost ground to a halt. From 1943 onwards, the autobahns were opened up to cyclists because of the low volume of vehicle traffic'.<sup>55</sup> Although 336,000 exemplars of Hitler's people car (the vw Beetle) were ordered, none was ever delivered because the car industry produced for military purposes during the Second World War.<sup>56</sup> For the creation of motorways, at the peak level, 124,483 workers were employed in 1936, not 600,000, as initially planned by General Inspector for Road Building Fritz Todt.<sup>57</sup> It is a myth that Hitler conceptualised the motorway, designed a people's car, created lots of jobs, and that such projects benefited everyone.

A third way of how Hitler's leadership was celebrated used music in tweets. Figure 7 shows a neo-Nazi example. The tweet says in German: 'We do not let our celebrations today be prohibited, and you? We have planned everything. #Adolf #Hitler #20041889'. It links to the rock song *Gemeinsam in den Sieg* [Together into Victory] by Nordsturm.<sup>58</sup> The song's refrain is: 'The only real holiday is the one that I am not allowed to mention. Every year in April, we get

55 Dick and Lichtenberg, 'The Myth of Hitler's Role in Building the Autobahn.'

56 Kershaw, *Hitler: A Biography*, caption to image 80; Christopher Kopper, 'Germany's National Socialist Transport Policy and the Claim of Modernity: Reality or Fake?' *The Journal of Transport History* 34, no. 2 (2013): 174.

57 Uwe Oster, 'The Autobahn Myth,' *History Today* 46, no. 11 (1996): 41.

58 'Nordsturm – Im April,' *Youtube.com*, April 22, 2011, accessed July 14, 2017, <https://youtu.be/FAJ8WTiTHDE>.

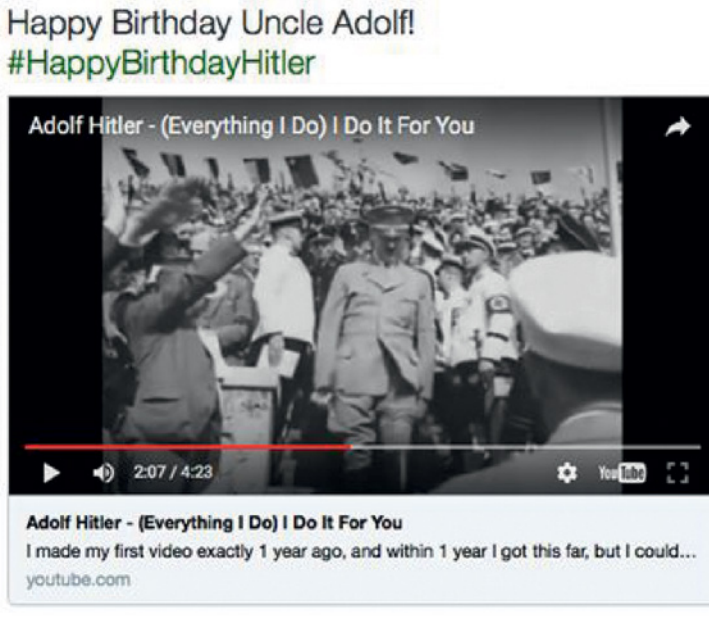


FIGURE 8 *The music video as medium for the fascist celebration of Hitler on Twitter and YouTube (No. 296)*

up together: Today is birthday! We drink to it!<sup>59</sup> The tweet communicates that prohibition of celebrating Hitler's birthday should be ignored, that one should be proud of Hitler, and therefore drink to him on this day. The tweet wants to appeal to Nazis and young people prone to Nazism. It uses not just rock culture, but also military aesthetic and a reference to drinking culture.

Another tweet (figure 8) uses a rock ballad, namely Bryan Adams' 1991 song '(Everything I Do) I Do It For You'. This piece of music is a love song. Its lyrics say: 'Yeah, I would fight for you, I'd lie for you. Walk the wire for you, yeah, I'd die for you. You know it's true: Everything I do, oh, I do it for you'. Fascism's charismatic authority is here expressed by de-contextualising a love song and re-contextualising it in the context of fascism. The video shows Hitler surrounded by cheering crowds, including children, women, and soldiers.<sup>60</sup> The message is twofold: It implies on the one hand that Hitler acted out of love for the Germans. And on the other hand it communicates that one should love and identify with Hitler and Nazism. The emotional message of a personal

59 Translation from German: 'Der einzig wahre Feiertag, ist der, den ich nicht nennen darf. Jedes Jahr im April stehen wir zusammen auf: Heute ist Geburtstag! Wir trinken darauf!'

60 'Adolf Hitler – (Everything I do) I do it for you,' *Youtube.com*, December 22, 2012, accessed July 14, 2017, <https://youtu.be/hfoF3WdnBi8>.

relation to the Führer is further intensified by the tweet's message 'Happy Birthday Uncle Adolf!' Both the video and the written text are emotionalisations and personalisations. They create the impression of a family, in which the uncle is the head who can be trusted.

The expression of a personal relation to Hitler is also underpinned by the use of his first name. The personal emotional relation of Germans and Austrians to Hitler was expressed during the Nazi period by the fact that Adolf was one of the most popular first names given to newborn boys.<sup>61</sup> Since the early 1950s, this name has practically disappeared.<sup>62</sup> Also many of those whose family name was Hitler, changed their surname. Today no Hitler can be found in the Austrian phonebook.<sup>63</sup> There is just one person named Hitler in the German phonebook.<sup>64</sup>

Figure 9 shows another example that uses Starship's 1985 song 'We Built this City'. The refrain goes: 'We built this city, we built this city on Rock 'n' Roll'. The video shows a colourful, youthfully dressed Hitler driving on a Nazi bike through a city.<sup>65</sup> The bike carries a basket that is decorated by a Nazi flag. A cat sits in the basket and sings along with Hitler. Hitler is presented as having magic powers that allow him to create and destroy things. Several themes are combined in this video: Hitler as entertainment and popular culture, online culture symbolised by the cat, Hitler as magician, Hitler as builder and creator. The video creates an aura of a popular architect who has magical powers. The idea that a charismatic leader has supernatural and superhuman powers is evoked. The video trivialises Nazism by distracting attention from the circumstance that Hitler was first and foremost one of the Nazi-architects of the Shoah and the Second World War.

Figure 10 offers another example. It uses an animated gif, in which Hitler is shown dancing in disco lights. The animation is an excerpt from one<sup>66</sup> of several YouTube videos<sup>67</sup> that have become known as Disco Hitler and Dancing

61 'Adolf,' *Beliebte-Vornamen.de*, accessed December 23, 2016, <http://www.beliebte-vornamen.de/4501-adolf.htm>.

62 Ibid.

63 <https://www.herold.at/telefonbuch>, accessed May 4, 2016.

64 <http://www.dastelefonbuch.de>, accessed May 4, 2016.

65 'Adolf Hitler – We built this city,' *Youtube.com*, January 15, 2015, accessed July 14, 2017, <https://youtu.be/lsRXRcAOfcU>.

66 'Hitler Dance,' *Youtube.com*, January 31, 2015, accessed March 4, 2016, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OoV\\_gsbYcxI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OoV_gsbYcxI).

67 Other examples include: 'Disco Führer / Dancing Hitler,' *Youtube.com*, April 29, 2014, accessed March 4, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pg6duaXzKBo>; 'Saturday Night Führer (Disco Hitler),' *Youtube.com*, May 26, 2013, accessed March 4, 2016, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6\\_PtflmONc4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6_PtflmONc4).





FIGURE 9 *The music video as medium for the fascist celebration of Hitler on Twitter and YouTube (No. 432)*



FIGURE 10  
*Hitler as popular music culture (No. 820)*

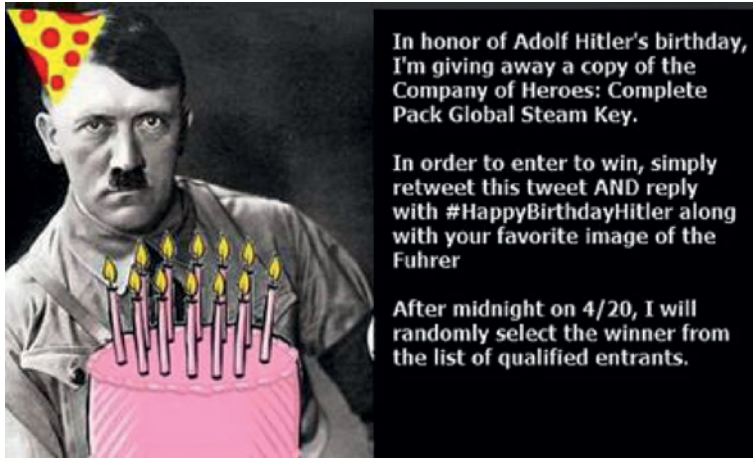


FIGURE 11 *A fascist tweet using a contest for spreading images of Hitler (No. 409)*

Hitler. The animated dancing Hitler is underpinned by techno music. The video's name is 'Hitler dance' and its description speaks of 'Hitler Guetta', which is a reference to the French house DJ and musician David Guetta. Hitler is presented as a symbol of coolness. The focus on the culture of cool renders any historical references to the horrors of the Shoah and German Nazi imperialism invisible.

A fourth form of online fascism that is focused on Hitler as person, uses games and contests. Figure 11 shows a tweet that tried to promote posting images of Hitler and the use of the hashtag #HappyBirthdayHitler by staging a contest, in which users could win a copy of the video game *Company of Heroes* by posting images of Hitler. The tweet trivialised Nazism by showing Hitler in birthday mood. *Company of Heroes* is a war game.<sup>68</sup> Its first part was released in 2006. Relic Entertainment describes its game the following way: 'Command the company that changed history: Delivering a visceral WWII gaming experience, *Company of Heroes* redefines real time strategy gaming by bringing the sacrifice of heroic soldiers, war-ravaged environments, and dynamic battlefields to life. Beginning with the D-Day Invasion of Normandy, players lead squads of Allied soldiers into battle against the German war machine through

68 'Company of Heroes,' *Wikipedia*, accessed July 14, 2017, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Company\\_of\\_Heroes](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Company_of_Heroes).

Did someone mention #Obama?  
Happy Birthday Adolf #Hitler



FIGURE 12

*Fascist presentation of Hitler as a popular, common person who is close to the people (No. 1169)*

some of the most pivotal battles of WWII.<sup>69</sup> The tweet implicitly communicates that Hitler is a military hero who led the German army into battle. It aims at glorifying war and Nazi imperialism.

A fifth form of leadership-focused online fascism presents Hitler as a man of the people. The tweet in figure 5 is one example. Figure 12 shows another one. The tweet presents Hitler as a common, popular leader, who is of the people and loved by them. It contrasts this image with one that implies that former US president Barak Obama is distant and alienated from citizens. Juxtaposing these two images also communicates that Obama is afraid of the people and therefore protects himself with lots of police. In contrast, the second image implies that Hitler wanted to be as close as possible to the people. There is also a certain racist undertone: It is not an accident that Hitler is juxtaposed to Obama, whose father was black and was born in Kenya. So implicitly the image also communicates: White leaders are popular and close to the people, whereas leaders who are black or have a black parent are unpopular and alienated from the people.

Ideologies hold together repressive collectives by providing a collective identity for them. In fascist ideology, Hitler is an important symbol of

69 *Company of Heroes*, accessed May 5, 2016, <http://www.companyofheroes.com/games/company-of-heroes>.

identification. One ideological strategy is positive self-presentation.<sup>70</sup> Strategies for positive self-presentation in fascism 2.0 that are focused on Hitler, as we have seen in this section, include: the combination of fascist symbols with symbols of harmlessness and happiness such as coffee, cakes, children, biscuits; the claim that Hitler was a strong political leader; the claim that Hitler was a popular, ordinary person who was close to the people; the use of internet memes, animated gifs, songs, popular culture, entertainment, rock music, or disco music. Harmless symbols and popular symbols usually not associated with Hitler help to draw attention away from Nazism's barbarism.

### Fascism 2.0's Second Element: Nationalism

Fascism appeals to a mythic collective such as the nation and race. It thereby diverts attention from class. '[R]acism and Anti-Semitism are substitutes for the class struggle.'<sup>71</sup> '[B]lood, community, folk, are devices for hiding the real constellation of power.'<sup>72</sup> Such collectivism is often said to be able to overcome the individualisation and atomisation brought about by capitalism, globalisation, and modernity.

Fascist parties are not just, as often wrongly assumed, middle-class parties, but have historically also appealed to blue-collar workers and other social groups. Woodley argues in this context that 'the social function of fascism is to create a unity of social forces incorporating propertied interests, lower-middle class voters and plebeian elements.'<sup>73</sup> The ideological construction of national and/or racial unity deflects attention from class conflicts and aims to appeal with nationalist and racist demagoguery to a large part of the population across social strata and classes. Via nationalist and racist ideology, fascism tries to construct a unity that is held together through hatred of an imagined outside so that class structures can be hidden.

We saw that there are tweets that try to define a collective unity and identity around Hitler as leader. There are other tweets that try to define such a unity around an imaginary national collective. A first way of doing so is to invoke the racist ideology of the existence of an Aryan race. Here are two examples:

70 Teun van Dijk, *Ideology: A Multidisciplinary Approach* (London: Sage, 1998), 309–311; Martin Reisigl and Ruth Wodak, *Discourse and Discrimination: Rhetorics of Racism and Anti-Semitism* (London: Routledge, 2001), 44–46.

71 Neumann, *Behemoth*, 125.

72 Ibid., 464.

73 Woodley, *Fascism and Political Theory*, 76.

'We must secure the existence of our race and a future for our progeny. #HappyBirthdayHitler #MAGA' (No. 259).

'On this day, 20th April of 1889 was born #AdolfHitler, The Führer and the true leader of aryan race. #NAZI #Birthday' (No. 336).

The first of these tweets is white supremacist in nature. It defines a white collective ('our race') that is perceived to be under threat and calls for preserving this collective. It is a reformulation of the white supremacist *Fourteen Word* slogan 'We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children.' David Lane coined this slogan. He was one of the founders of the neo-Nazi terror organization *The Order*. The formulations 'our race', 'our progeny' and 'Aryan race' are somatonyms and racionyms.<sup>74</sup> They try to 'racialise' and biologise society, i.e. present society as consisting of races. The use of the possessive pronoun 'our' tries to intensify the feeling of belonging to this illusory collective. The use of the verb 'secure' communicates a threat and attack and the urgency that something needs to be done. The first tweet uses the hashtag #MAGA that stands for 'Make America Great Again', the main political slogan used by the then 2016 Republican Presidential candidate Donald Trump.

A second way of constructing collective unity is to focus on Europe. Figure 13 shows an example. On the one hand, a personal, family-like relation to Hitler is expressed by showing someone holding a signed image of Hitler and by the use of the personalising formulation 'Onkel Adolf!' [Uncle Adolf]. Referring to Hitler as uncle implies that there is a blood relationship between all those who are considered to be part of the imagined collective. In the shown tweet, this collective is presented as Europe. Associating Europe with Hitler and speaking of Hitler as 'Europe's greatest Son!' implies that Hitler is a symbol for a European cultural or biological collective. Yet Hitler defined himself as German. He saw Europe as imperial living space or *Lebensraum* for the territorial expansion of Germany, the augmentation of the number of Germans and the expansion of German culture. He called for the 'enlargement of our national domain of life in Europe'<sup>75</sup> and wrote that his party's aim is 'to guarantee the German nation the soil and territory to which it is entitled on this earth.'<sup>76</sup> 'The folkish movement must be not the attorney for other nations, but the vanguard fighter of its own.'<sup>77</sup>

<sup>74</sup> Reisigl and Wodak, *Discourse and Discrimination*, 48.

<sup>75</sup> Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf: Complete and unabridged, fully annotated* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1941), 949.

<sup>76</sup> Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 947.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 950.

Happy 127th Onkel Adolf!

Europe's greatest Son!

#HappyBirthdayHitler



FIGURE 13 *Fascist construction of Hitler as great European (No. 673)*

‘Germany will be either a world power or will not be at all.’<sup>78</sup> ‘Today we are eight million Germans in Europe! That foreign policy will be acknowledged as correct only if, a bare century from now, two hundred and fifty million Germans are living on this continent.’<sup>79</sup> Claiming that Hitler was a great European, as the tweet shown in figure 13 does, lacks any understanding of political history. Hitler defined himself as a German nationalist and racist who saw Europe merely as potential colonial German territory.

This section showed that in the analysed dataset two nationalist strategies were used for positive identity definition of an imagined white collective: the appeal to either a German, ‘Aryan’ collective or a European collective.

### Fascism 2.0’s Third Element: The Friend-Enemy Scheme

Fascist ideology not just works with opportunities for psychological projections ‘upwards’ (into the Führer), but also downwards: It invites individuals to define

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 979.

themselves as a national collective that is different from outsiders that are presented as enemies and subhuman beings (*Untermenschen*). The mythic collective is in fascist ideology distinguished from constructed enemies. Fascism argues for terror against as well as the intimidation and annihilation of these illusionary enemies. Fascism uses ideological forms of national unity. These ideologies define unity against specific opponents: 'The demon reappears in all manner of forms, across the whole spectrum of representations of the enemy; the bellicose Communist, the lascivious Jew, or the indolent citizen . . . Each in his own way threatens to devour the not-yet-fully-born soldier.'<sup>80</sup>

Franz Neumann in his study of Nazi Germany stressed the racist character of German Nazi imperialism ('racial imperialism'). The ideology of the friend-enemy-scheme motivates exterminatory and imperialistic politics. 'The essence of the theory is extremely simple. Germany and Italy are proletarian races, surrounded by a world of hostile plutocratic capitalistic-Jewish democracies. [The war is thus a war for] . . . the attainment of a better life for the master race through reducing the vanquished states and their satellites to the level of colonial peoples.'<sup>81</sup> Nazi imperialism is based on the ideology of creating 'Aryan' living space, by military means,<sup>82</sup> and constructs the 'Aryans' as proletarian have-nots who are threatened by Jews, democracy, and socialism.<sup>83</sup>

'Positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation seems to be a fundamental property of ideologies.'<sup>84</sup> We saw in previous sections ways of how fascism 2.0 uses positive presentations of Hitler and collectives. Fascism always defines itself against imagined enemies. So negative other-presentation is also a key feature of fascism 2.0. A first strategy of the use of the friend-enemy-scheme in the analysed dataset was the general praise of the Shoah. Some examples follow.

'#HappyBirthdayHitler thanks for killing the jews' (No. 644)

'I hear April showers bring Mayflowers. This is due to post-gas Jews providing excellent fertilizer. #HappyBirthdayHitler' (No. 752)

The first tweet expresses agreement to the Shoah by thanking Hitler for Nazism's exterminatory anti-Semitic politics. The second tweet expresses such

80 Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies, Volume 2: Male Bodies: Psychologying the White Terror* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 378.

81 Neumann, *Behemoth*, 187, 193.

82 Ibid., 130.

83 Ibid., 221.

84 Van Dijk, *Ideology*, 69.



FIGURE 14  
Anti-Semitic tweet (No. 573)

approval by an inhumane joke that suggests that gassed Jews should be used as fertiliser. Figure 14 shows an anti-Semitic tweet that visualises Hitler as a shark that is about to attack a swimmer who is depicted as being Jewish. The tweet text 'He could have saved us all' expresses that in the opinion of this Twitter user, Nazism's exterminatory politics that killed six million Jews did not go far enough and that it should have exterminated all Jews in the world.

Fascism is often thought of as being humourless. Empirical studies have in contrast shown that humour is often deliberately used as fascist strategy. Michael Billig analysed racist joke sites linked to the Ku Klux Klan. His study illustrates connections between humour and hatred.<sup>85</sup> Humour 'can provide a means for expressing hatred and, thus, bigotry can bring its own pleasures to the bigot . . . The KKK jokes . . . treat humans as non-human.'<sup>86</sup> Simon Weaver analysed racist jokes on five websites.<sup>87</sup> He found that 'humour can act as a form of racist rhetoric and thus should not always be seen as "just a joke" or fundamentally harmless.'<sup>88</sup> He identifies two basic ideal-types of racist jokes, one operating through 'the inclusion of the "other" through inferiorization', the

85 Michael Billig, 'Humour and Hatred: The Racist Jokes of the Ku Klux Klan,' *Discourse & Society* 12, no. 3 (2002): 267–289.

86 Michael Billig, 'Humour and Hatred,' 279, 285.

87 Simon Weaver, 'Jokes, Rhetoric and Embodied Racism: A Rhetorical Discourse Analysis of the Logics of Racist Jokes on the Internet,' *Ethnicities* 11, no. 4 (2011): 413–435.

88 Weaver, 'Jokes, Rhetoric and Embodied Racism,' 431.



other using ‘the exclusion of the “other”’.<sup>89</sup> The first type justifies discrimination and exploitation. The second type legitimates segregation, deportation and annihilation. Hitler jokes on social media show fascist online joy in torment and fascist pleasure in exclusion, stereotyping, humiliation and hatred and its expression in the online world as user-generated content. They confirm that fascism and humour are compatible – also in the online world.

A second friend-enemy-strategy that could be found in the dataset was the identification of Jews with finance capital. An example:

‘Philosopher. Hero. Genius. Liberator. He fought for freedom & against the tyranny of international finance. #Hitler’ (No. 3403)

This anti-Semitic tweet received a particularly high approval of 86 re-tweets and 144 likes. It presents Hitler as a heroic liberator and the Shoah as a form of freedom. It identifies Jews with ‘international finance’, which expresses several anti-Semitic prejudices, namely that ‘Jews are criminal world conspirators’, ‘Jews are business-minded, tricky and fraudulent; they are the prototypical capitalists’, ‘Jews are social parasites’.<sup>90</sup> Hitler constantly expressed such anti-Semitic stereotypes. He for example spoke of the ‘despotism of international world finance, Jewry!’<sup>91</sup> and of ‘international world finance Judaism’s’<sup>92</sup> goal of enslaving the world.

A third friend-enemy strategy that was present in the dataset was the association of Hitler with contemporary political opposition to migrants, refugees and people of colour:

‘The agenda for tonight is to send the Negroes back to Africa. #Happy-BirthdayHitler’ (No. 3513)

The first tweet uses the racionym ‘Negroes’ for characterising black people in a derogatory manner. Blacks are presented as being inherently non-Western and to belong to Africa. The tweet shown in figure 15 calls for the killing of refugees. It expresses approval of the Shoah and calls for a systematic, industrial mass extermination of refugees. The impression of the demand of a ‘Holocaust against refugees’ is achieved by combing the two hashtags #Holocaust and #RefugeesAreWelcome and adding that refugees are welcome ‘in my shower’.

89 Ibid.

90 Reissigl and Wodak, *Discourse and Discrimination*, 56.

91 Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 674.

92 Ibid., 875.

And then a holy war began  
 Happy #AdolfHitlerDay  
 #holocaust #refugeesarewelcome in my shower



FIGURE 15 Fascist tweet calling for a 'Holocaust against refugees' (No. 2455)

This formulation plays with the fact that in the Nazi extermination camps gas chambers were often presented to victims as showers. Calling mass extermination a 'holy war' plays with the anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim prejudices that Jews and Muslims are different in culture and religion from Europeans, therefore do not belong to the West, and that the 'Jews are the murders of Christ, . . . desecrators of hosts, ritual murderers and well-poisoners.'<sup>93</sup> Such tweets transfer Hitler's barbaric politics to contemporary times and call for deporting or killing black people and refugees.

A fourth friend-enemy strategy used in the analysed tweets focused on conspiracy theories.

'#Hitler started wwII. Oh really? I think not. <https://t.co/ngz7pkVJDL#tcot#ccot3altright#wr#WWII#israel#jews>' (No. 3734)

This tweet links to an article titled 'Hitler Was a War Monger! He Started wwII . . . Oh Really???'<sup>94</sup> It links to various quotes and documents that together want to suggest that it was not Nazi Germany that started the Second World War. The claim is that Jewish organisations declared war on Germany after Hitler rose to power in 1933. It shows an excerpt from a *Daily Mail* article from 24 March, 1933, titled 'Judea Declares War on Germany'. Vladimir Zhabotinsky,

93 Reisl and Wodak, *Discourse and Discrimination*, 56.

94 'Hitler Was a War Monger! He Started wwII . . . Oh Really???' *Justice4germans.com*, December 24, 2102, accessed December 23, 2016, <https://justice4germans.com/2012/12/24/hitler-was-a-war-monger-he-started-wwii-oh-really/>.

who established militant Jewish self-defence groups, is quoted as saying in 1934: 'Our Jewish interests demand the final destruction of Germany'. It also shows a *Daily Express* article from 24 March 1933, that reported that 14 million Jews 'declare war on the German persecutors of their co-religionists'. The implication that the article wants to make is that it was not Hitler and Nazism, but Jewry that caused the Second World War.

The conspiracy theory that Jews were responsible for the Second World War uses single quotes from single persons and media sources. It ignores that Hitler's eliminationist anti-Semitism was evident much earlier to everyone who read what he wrote or listened to him. In *Mein Kampf*'s volume 1 that was published in 1925, he wrote that the Jew is 'always only a *parasite* in the body of other peoples.'<sup>95</sup> 'But this spreading is the typical symptom of all parasites; he always looks for a new feeding soil for his race . . . He is and remains the typical parasite, a sponger who, like a harmful bacillus, spreads out more and more if only a favorable medium invites him to do so.'<sup>96</sup> The biologicistic description of Jews as parasites, spongers and bacillus implies a danger that needs to be eliminated.

Another tweet said 'Adolf #Hitler 20th April 1889 – 30th April 1945 We celebrate because we know the #truth' (#1346) and linked to the apologetic and revisionist documentary *Adolf Hitler: The Greatest Story Never Told* (2013). The tweet achieved a fairly large attention of 86 re-tweets and 120 likes. The reference to the 'truth' and a 'story never told' as well as the use of the hashtag #truth imply the claim that there is a hidden reality of Nazism that has been kept secret and that the documentary reveals this to the public. Conspiracy theories always work with the claim that they make hidden secrets visible and public. Among other things, the video questions the existence of the Holocaust, documenting voices that claim that there is no proof that gas chambers existed. It says for example: 'Only in Eastern European camps, where no investigations ever occurred or were allowed, it is still claimed that millions of Jews entered the gas chambers'. The movie's end titles thank the white supremacist, neo-Nazi internet forum Stormfront 'for their help in transcribing the series'.

We have in this section seen that the friend-enemy scheme is in fascism 2.0 present as various strategies of negative other-online presentation. Such strategies include for example general praise for the Shoah and other fascist crimes; the identification of Jews with finance capital; the visual and textual association of Hitler with contemporary political opposition to migrants, refugees and people of colour; or the spread of conspiracy theories.

95 Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 419.

96 Ibid., 420.

### Fascism 2.0's Fourth Element: Patriarchy and Naturalism

In relation to nature, biology, and the social construction of gender, fascism tends to idealise the body, nature, male supremacy, fitness and health of the population, physical labour and toil, the soldier and the army, and the importance of procreation. It tends to define the sphere of production as a masculine and reproduction as a feminine/private sphere. At the same time, the private becomes militarised and subordinated to the state, nation and race. Procreation is defined as a national duty. The model of the soldier defines images and practices of health, sports, fitness and the body. Also the motive of the competitive, physically strong male soldier can be found in fascist culture. An example is Leni Riefenstahl's movie *Olympia* (1938). Not just the body, but also nature is part of fascist ideology that often presents blood, soil, and love of nature as part of the homeland.

Fascism tends to view homosexuality 'as a threat to the integrity of the race-nation.'<sup>97</sup> Klaus Theweleit argues that fascism is sexually schizophrenic because it is based on the double bind 'thou shall love men,'<sup>98</sup> that includes the contradictory principles of 'love for the leader'<sup>99</sup> and 'thou shall not be homosexual.'<sup>100</sup> Theweleit sees a connection between fascism's 'male bonding and the white terror – a connection that provides the pleasure of power.'<sup>101</sup>

In the analysed dataset, a first form of fascist patriarchy 2.0 focused on the claim that Hitler was the heartthrob of all women, cared about families, and loved children. Figure 16 shows an example. The tweet links to a video that shows children, pregnant women, a mother with her child, happy couples, interlaced with sound and text from a Hitler speech: 'The most precious possession you have in the world, is your own people! And for this people and for the sake of this people, we will struggle and fight! And never slacken! And never tire! And never lose courage! And never despair!' The tweet adds the message 'The man who fought the Jews'. The combination of the video and the tweet text glorifies the Nazis' racist population policies that according to Franz Neumann focused on a double goal, namely the commandment of women to 'produce children' and the ss's 'commandment to kill those who are not fit to

97 Woodley, *Fascism and Political Theory*, 228.

98 Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, volume 2, 339.

99 Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies. Volume 1: Women, Floods, Bodies, History* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 60.

100 Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, volume 2, 339.

101 Ibid., 325.



FIGURE 16 An example of fascist patriarchy 2.0 (No. 346)

live.<sup>102</sup> The Nazis' maxim was: 'Produce as many children as possible so that the earth can be ruled by the master race; kill the unhealthy so that the masters need not be burdened by the care of the weak.'<sup>103</sup>

Second, there were tweets in the dataset that suggested that Hitler had been a lover of nature and animals. Figures 17 and 18 show two examples.

Showing Hitler as loving animals (dogs, roe deer, etc.) suggests that he was a loving and caring leader. The German shepherd dog often symbolises loyalty and bravery. Hitler was often portrayed with his female shepherdess Blondi and other dogs. Such images, as also used in the tweet shown in figure 18, communicate that Hitler found the qualities ascribed to the shepherd as important and that the German people should practice loyalty to the Führer and bravery. The German shepherd stands in Nazism for the militarisation of society that sees society as constant warfare and citizens as warriors for 'Aryanism'.

The tweet in figure 17 claims that Hitler 'loved & cherished animals' and that he was the first environmentalist. The roe deer is a symbol of beauty, grace, peace, innocence, or benevolence. Portraying Hitler as a lover of animals and naturalist tries to justify Nazism by presenting positive claims about Hitler that

<sup>102</sup> Neumann, *Behemoth*, 112.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.



FIGURE 17 An example of fascist naturalism 2.0 (No. 231)

distract attention from the barbarity of the Nazis' politics. It is an attempt at impression management by inverting the association of Nazism with terrorism, imperialism, racism, and extermination by advancing symbols that stand for opposed properties such as care, peace, tolerance and love. The tweet in figure 18 contrasts images of Hitler with women and Hitler with German shepherds. It communicates fascism's patriarchal dualism that draws a strict ideological separation between men/women, society/nature, body/mind, rational/irrational, production/reproduction, war/peace, public/private, intellectual/emotional, aggression/love, active/passive, etc. Fascism's model and vision of society is an extremely hierarchical and militarised form of patriarchy, in which there is a strict gender division of labour and the male soldier is the ideal citizen.

Hitler's patriarchal model of society becomes evident in *Mein Kampf*, where he writes that in marriage, 'the woman is here only the passive part, anyhow.'<sup>104</sup> He also says that the 'goal of female education has invariably to be the future mother.'<sup>105</sup> Education would have to focus on physical education, military

<sup>104</sup> Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 342.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 621.



FIGURE 18 *An example of fascist naturalism 2.0 (No. n46)*

discipline, authoritarianism, and nationalism in order to make children and youth respect authority, prepare the boys for the military and to instil in them enthusiasm for soldierdom: 'His entire education and development has to be directed at giving him the conviction of being absolutely superior to the others. With his physical force and skill he has again to win the belief in the invincibility of his entire nationality. For what once led the German army to victory was the sum of the confidence which the individual and all in common had in their leaders.'<sup>106</sup> 'In the folkish State, therefore, the army . . . has to be looked upon as the ultimate and highest school of patriotic education.'<sup>107</sup> Exercise would be important to create what Hitler considered to be beautiful German bodies. The 'most beautiful bodies find one another and thus help in giving the nation new beauty.'<sup>108</sup>

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 618.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 620.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 619.

This section has shown how fascism 2.0 expresses elements of patriarchy on Twitter: The focus on German women's love to Hitler, Hitler's relation to animals and nature, distracts attention from the horrors of Nazism and presents fascism in a positive light. It also expresses a highly militaristic and patriarchal model of society that is modelled on the male soldier and grounded in a repressive ideological dualism.

## Conclusion

This article has with the example case of Hitler's birthday on Twitter contributed to the analysis of how fascism 2.0 works. It identified four elements of fascism 2.0: online authoritarianism, online nationalism, the friend-enemy scheme online, and online patriarchy and naturalism. These elements are ideal types that can be found partly separately and partly interacting. Fascism 2.0 both has form and ideological content. Its form includes the use of text, hashtags, links to online materials, images, animated pictures, jokes, satire, cartoons, movies, the de- and re-contextualisation and combination of symbols, entertainment, popular culture, songs, music videos, and memes.

At the content level, we saw that fascism 2.0's strategies can for example include positive self-presentation by the use of harmless symbols (cake, coffee, cookies, etc.); the presentation of Hitler as strong political leader and ordinary person; the appeal to a unitary national, racial or cultural collective; the association of fascism with the love for families, children, nature and animals; or the idealization of militarism, patriarchy and authoritarianism. Another strategy of fascism 2.0 is negative other-presentation that tries to deride fascism's enemies by presenting them as inferior and parasitic, celebrating and rationalising their extermination, the denial of extermination and other fascist crimes, the association of Hitler and fascism with contemporary scapegoats, or the use of conspiracy theories.

Why does a significant number of Twitter users find it appealing to celebrate Hitler on social media? On the one hand, there are straightforward ideological reasons: The ongoing economic, political and social crisis of capitalism is, arguably, a 'fascism-producing crisis' that has in many parts of the world resulted in an expansion of authoritarian populist, far-right, right-wing populist, fascist, and neo-Nazi expressions, groups, movements and parties and in a significant level of support for such tendencies among citizens. Geoff Eley compares the far right then and now. He says that in the age of Donald Trump, Nigel Farage, the Golden Dawn, Jobbik, the Front National, the Austrian Freedom Party, the



Belgian Flemish Block, the Danish People's Party, the Norwegian Progress Party, the Swiss People's Party, or the Dutch Party for Freedom,

[f]ar-right advocacy has increasingly regrouped around the programmatic defense of the distinctiveness of national culture and its threatened integrity. In the language deployed by right-wing populists, cultural identity has become key to how the alienness of 'immigrants' can be publicly rationalized; such intruders are people who share neither a national heritage nor 'European civilization' as historically transmitted, who do not belong, who are foreign to the way 'we' live, who lack 'our' cultural and moral values.<sup>109</sup>

Today, one would find a 'culturalized racism'.<sup>110</sup> The danger is for Eley that a crisis of society is often a 'fascism-producing crisis'.<sup>111</sup> Given that the contemporary age of crisis is also an age of social media, it is self-evident that the mediation of fascism also takes place online on platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Pinterest.

On the other hand, in a culture of neoliberalism, competitive individualism and mediated spectacles, where the commodity form has colonised large parts of life in society and ever more social relations have not just become competitive, but also realms of advertising and promotional culture, cool capitalism as a specific form of capitalism has emerged.<sup>112</sup> Cool capitalism has the capacity 'to repackage virtually anything for mass distribution' so that even the 'most brutal, misogynistic and homophobic features' of society can become 'another consumer item, to be tasted and discarded at will'.<sup>113</sup> In cool capitalism, even war and fascism's most horrendous crimes can turn into entertainment and popular culture. Fascism 2.0 is to a specific degree a popular cultural spectacle that works with re-contextualisation, culture jamming, symbols and practices of internet subculture (such as internet memes), and popular cultural expressions. To a specific degree the motivation of popular cultural fascism is certainly ideologically motivated fascism. In others, it is the drive to shock in order to impress, create public attention, and define a particular identity. It can also be the combination of both motivations.

109 Geoff Eley, 'Fascism Then and Now,' *Socialist Register* 52 (2015): 109.

110 Eley, 'Fascism Then and Now', 109.

111 Ibid., 112.

112 Jim McGuigan, 'The Coolness of Capitalism Today,' *tripleC: Communication, Capitalism & Critique* 10, no. 2 (2012): 425–438; Jim McGuigan, *Cool Capitalism* (London: Pluto, 2009).

113 McGuigan, *Cool Capitalism*, 98.

It is interesting to observe that whereas offline fascism tends to attract anti-fascist protests, anti-fascism can to a much lesser degree be found in online spaces where fascism 2.0 exists. When the right-wing Thügida group organised a torch march on Hitler's 2016 birthday in the German city of Jena, it had to face several thousand anti-fascist protestors. On social media, protests against the online celebration of Hitler's birthday were in contrast rare. One user spoke of a 'bunch of drug/Hitler loving idiots' (No. 2137) using the hashtag #Happy420. Others posted: 'All y'all people saying #happybirthdayhitler deserve to go to hell he killed innocent civilian lives and y'all applaud him wtf' (No. 657); 'Grund zum feiern gibt es in zehn Tagen: 30.04.45 – Todestag des Massenmörders #AdolfHitler' (No. 1138) ['There will be reason to celebrate in ten days: 30.04.45 – the day of death of the mass murderer #AdolfHitler']. Such expressions of disagreement were, however, single in character. To be effective, anti-fascism needs to challenge fascism wherever it occurs, also on social media.

The question arises what could be done against fascism 2.0. A significant share of its expressions violates Twitter's (and other platforms') terms of service. The Twitter Rules prohibit abusive behaviour and hateful conduct:

we do not tolerate behavior that crosses the line into abuse, including behavior that harasses, intimidates, or uses fear to silence another user's voice . . . . Hateful conduct: You may not promote violence against or directly attack or threaten other people on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, religious affiliation, age, disability, or disease. We also do not allow accounts whose primary purpose is inciting harm towards others on the basis of these categories.<sup>114</sup>

Twitter has a report button that allows users to directly report a displayed tweet as being spam, abusive, or harmful. And it also has a report form that allows reporting abusive, harassing, violent, and offensive behaviour as well as spam and privacy violations. The problem is that in order to always respond accordingly and in a timely manner to fascism 2.0, enough well-trained and fairly paid employees are needed. If precarious workers who hardly have enough time available to deal with a single tweet in detail, then an effective response becomes impossible. Online culture is often fairly complex, is not always straightforward, and therefore it takes time to understand what particular tweets are about. A possibility that could be further explored is to introduce

<sup>114</sup> Twitter Rules, accessed May 6, 2016, <https://support.twitter.com/articles/18311>.

a fascism-report button on Twitter and other social media platforms and to train and employ anti-fascist social media experts specialised in responding to online fascism.

Given the complexity of online communication systems, it will never be possible to perfectly control online expressions of fascism. Fascism 2.0 is a societal problem, there is no technical fix to it. Theodor W. Adorno stresses in this context: 'The past will have been worked through only when the causes of what happened then have been eliminated. Only because the causes continue to exist does the captivating spell of the past remain to this day unbroken.'<sup>115</sup> Deletion can spur the incentive to multiply fascism 2.0's efforts and the development of sophisticated camouflage strategies.

The question is then how popular culture could be used on social media in order to create and diffuse intelligent, enlightening, critical engagements with the history and reality of fascism. On the one hand, official commemorations often do not reach broad parts of the public. Popular culture is in contrast a mass phenomenon. But on the other hand, Hitler as popular culture risks that the Shoah and fascism are trivialised and questions of historical guilt are not asked. Popular culture and humour in the context of fascism and fascism 2.0 should invite historical engagement, offer critical knowledge, and provide a critique of the history and reality of fascism. It should be an offer for deeper discussions and enlightening engagement among users. At the same time such serious popular anti-fascist culture cannot replace the need for in-depth documentary films, exhibitions, public events, and memorials.

Horkheimer and Adorno acknowledge the 'ambiguity of laughter':<sup>116</sup> 'If laughter up to now has been a sign of violence, an outbreak of blind, obdurate nature, it nevertheless contains the opposite element, in that through laughter blind nature becomes aware of itself as such and thus abjures its destructive violence.' Humour may be a way of how the oppressed try to cope with their oppression or may be part of challenging oppression. It is possible that anti-fascist online videos are enlightening, humorous and serious at the same time. The problem is that this genre hardly exists and that there is a dominance of superficial and often problematic content about Hitler and fascism in internet culture. Charlie Chaplin's film *The Great Dictator* (1940) is both a parody and enlightening. Anti-fascism 2.0 requires equivalents to *The Great Dictator* in the social media age. Chaplin commented on his movie: 'Pessimists say I may

<sup>115</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, 'The Meaning of Working Through the Past,' in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), 103.

<sup>116</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 60.

fail – that dictators aren't funny any more, that the evil is too serious. That is wrong. If there is one thing I know it is that power can always be made ridiculous. The bigger that fellow gets the harder my laughter will hit him.'<sup>117</sup> Even Adorno was a Chaplin fan. Intelligent, critical, enlightening popular culture about Hitler could be spread on 20 April and on other symbolic fascist occasions on social media. Anti-fascism 2.0 requires a multidimensional political strategy and is in the end a matter of the time, people, praxis, institutions and resources needed for challenging fascist narratives and telling anti-fascist counter-narratives online.

Adorno argues: 'That fascism lives on . . . is due to the fact that the objective conditions of society that engendered fascism continue to exist.'<sup>118</sup> In this situation, 'only exaggeration per se today can be the medium of truth.'<sup>119</sup> This assumption seems to imply that exaggeration not just of content, but also of the form of memory, is not per-se affirmative, but can also take on critical form. Adorno stressed that education is an important mechanism for remembering the past and the causes of fascism and working towards not repeating it. The question that arises today is how the educational memory of Nazism and Hitler can take on such a critical form on the internet.

---

117 Robert van Gelder, 'Chaplin Draws A Keen Weapon', *New York Times*, September 8, 1940.

118 Adorno, 'The Meaning of Working Through the Past,' 98.

119 Adorno, 'The Meaning of Working Through the Past,' 99.