

## Preface

The global strengthening of the populist radical right, which some prefer to categorize as wannabe fascist or postfascist, constitutes perhaps the major challenge to liberal democracy since its crises in the 1920s and 1930s that led to the establishment of fascist regimes or to the adoption of some of their practices and policies across the world. During the interwar period the left and the right proposed dictatorship as the alternative to the crises of parliamentary democracy. Fascism, as Finchelstein and Pinto have demonstrated, was a global phenomenon. Its appeal diminished significantly after the Axis Powers lost the war and the world was exposed to their genocide of populations racialized as inferior. Yet the specter of fascism never fully disappeared. Small, marginalized groups proudly labeled themselves fascists. In the last decades of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, radical right parties, many of them of fascist origins, became normalized and are attempting to win office or more likely to be part of coalition governments in Europe. Narendra Modi aims to rebuild a Hindu nation excluding its Muslim population, and Benjamin Netanyahu is attempting to replace a secular state, further marginalizing non-Jewish Israeli citizens and the Palestinian population. In the Americas a new type of right-wing leader like Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, and Javier Milei has won elections. Once in office they delegitimized democratic institutions and thrived on polarization. Trump and Bolsonaro disregarded the basic democratic principle that elections are the only legitimate venue to get to power. When they lost the vote, they cried fraud and their followers led violent takeovers of Congress.

Are we experiencing the return of fascism? How best to characterize these leaders, their movements, and their enablers? Is a leader enough for fascism? Or are a party and movements in the streets needed to properly describe them as fascist? These are not only academic but also profoundly normative questions. Are we willing to give up on a democracy that is built on pluralism, that defends the rights of people to hold different beliefs, and in which dialogue is the tool used to convince rivals of one's arguments? Will notions of the heterosexual and patriarchal family replace the rights of citizens to choose their sexuality, and women's reproductive rights? Will nativism and xenophobia trump efforts to build multiethnic democracies?

To make sense of our turbulent times we need to base our speculations about the future "on an accurate analysis of the past" (Mosse 1999: 44). This is not the first comparison of fascism and populism (Berezin 2019; Eatwel 2017; Finchelstein 2017, 2024; Gentile 2024; Germani 1967, 1978; Hennessy 1976; Laclau 1977) nor a systematic review of the academic controversies around

each of these concepts (de la Torre 2019; Kallis 2003; Pinto 1995). This Element provides a synthesis of the debates focusing on the different effects of fascism and populism on democracy. Their similarities and differences need to be clearly spelled out to assess the populists' claim that they improve democracy by returning power to the people, or the fascists' notion that plebiscitary acclamation and unity behind a larger-than-life leader express the popular will better than liberal representation.

This Element is intended for a general audience, undergraduate students, and specialists. It uses simple words to discuss theoretical, conceptual, and historical processes in a rigorous yet accessible way. It follows the steps of Latin American scholars who have compared these isms since Juan Perón was in office in the 1940s and 1950s. Gino Germani (1967) focused on their distinct class bases and their emergence under different moments of the modernization process. Ernesto Laclau (1977) argued that fascism is a populism of the dominant classes that emerged in a moment of crisis of the left and of the power bloc. For Federico Finchelstein (2014), populism is fascism adapted to democratic times when leaders and their movements renounced violently eliminating their enemies and accepted elections.

I have been working on populism, democratization, and authoritarianism since the 1990s. I started to compare populism with fascism when Nadia Urbinati and Federico Finchelstein invited me to present at the Fascism across Borders international conference at Columbia University and The New School for Social Research in 2015. This Element relies on and develops some of my previous arguments that despite their similarities populism and fascism are different isms (de la Torre 2022; de la Torre and Srisa-nga 2022). In my research I used historical-sociological and ethnographic approaches to theorize on the relationship of populism with democracy and authoritarianism. More recently I have immersed myself in the historical and theoretical literature on fascism to contrast it with populism. I have delivered papers on this Element's project in invited lectures at the University of Kiel, the University of Guadalajara, the Catholic University of Peru, and the Federal University of Ceará.

## 1 Introduction: Fascism or Populism?

The words *populism* and *fascism* are not confined to academic circles. These terms have left the ivory tower, becoming combat words widely used by politicians, pundits, and citizens to insult rivals or to try to come to terms with the unexpected political developments of the twenty-first century. Contrary to the predictions of most pundits, Donald Trump won the 2016 election; after he was defeated by Joe Biden, his followers organized a failed coup d'état. Despite

four indictments, ninety-one felony charges, and convictions in thirty-four charges, Trump won the 2024 elections. His admirers Jair Bolsonaro and Javier Milei became the presidents of Brazil and Argentina, the two largest countries of South America. Bolsonaro followed Trump's playbook and his followers tried a failed coup when he lost the election to his archenemy, Lula da Silva of the leftist Workers Party, in 2022. Yet differently from Trump, Bolsonaro was prohibited by the superior electoral court from running for office until 2030. He was also accused of overseeing a broad conspiracy to hold on to power regardless of the results of the 2022 elections. Gone are the days in Europe when the traditional right and the center-left formed a *cordon sanitaire* to stop extremist radical right-wingers from winning elections or ruling as if they were normal parties.

How do we make sense of these conundrums? Are we experiencing a renaissance of fascism and a crisis of democracy like the experiences of the 1920s and 1930s? Or, alternatively, are these manifestations of populism in its radical right-wing variants? Does using the term *populism* absolve radical right parties of fascist origins like Georgia Meloni's *Fratelli d' Italia* of their past? Can the concept of populism be restricted to its right- or left-wing variants only? Are we living at the beginning of the twenty-first century under a new historical constellation that historian Enzo Traverso (2019) calls postfascism? Or are we seeing the emergence of what historian Federico Finchelstein (2024: 3) labels wannabe fascists that, at least for now, are "weaker and more incompetent than classical fascists"? What are the dangers of labeling leaders and movements that use elections and do not rely on paramilitary groups as fascists? Is this term further trivialized when used as an emotional weapon that could get in the way of rational debates?

These normative and theoretical questions are difficult indeed because the academic community has not agreed on how we define these categories. Scholars have defined populism and fascism as ideologies, strategies, and styles to get to power and to govern, and as regimes. For some, fascism is a type of populism of the ruling classes (Laclau 1977). For others, Nazism and fascism have a populist phase before they become regimes. Historian Peter Fritzche (2016: 5) wrote, "the idea of 'the people' was both the rhetorical ground on which National Socialists operated and the horizon for which they reached." Others see a danger in the overextension of these concepts. Some propose that scholars stop using fascism (Allayrduce 2003); others argue that populism has been robbed "of its specific historical content . . . At this point the concept of populism loses much, if not all, of its validity as a transnational analytical category" (Jones 2016: 33).

If scholars cannot agree on what fascism and populism are and if they are even valuable and useful concepts, how to stop the proliferation of abuses of these terms by pundits, citizens, and politicians who use them to label whoever they

dislike? *Populism* is used to categorize politicians and their followers as irrational, the poorly educated who respond with their guts instead of their brains. Yet not all consider that this word is a stigma. Jean-Luc Mélenchon, leader of La France Insoumise, for example, uses it as a badge of honor because he says he is against elites. Differently from leaders in other world regions, right-wing and other politicians in the United States dispute who is the authentic populist. Criticizing candidate Donald Trump, President Barack Obama called himself populist. After winning the 2016 election Steve Bannon, MAGA strategist and ideologue, asserted, “Trump is the leader of a populist uprising” (de la Torre and Srisa-nga 2022: 2). Differently from the 1920s and 1930s when elites, social scientists, artists, and intellectuals proudly collaborated with and belonged to fascist parties and movements, nowadays very few people use the term as a self-definition. It is more often a stigma and a reminder that fascism caused the death of about 40 million civilians and 20 million soldiers during the Second World War.<sup>1</sup> Does this mean that fascism was just the product of a particular historical constellation, and if so, was it a unique phenomenon? Or can fascism manifest itself differently under new historical conjunctures?

This Element analyzes how scholars have used these concepts, their similarities, and their differences, and how they undermined or replaced democracy with one-person dictatorships conceptualized as lasting over time. But before proceeding, it is worthwhile describing the socioeconomic and political transformations that led to the emergence and normalization of the radical right in Europe and the Americas in the twenty-first century.

## Europe

A good place to start is Cas Mudde’s description of the mainstreaming of the far right illustrated by the different actions of citizens, the media, and European institutions when the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) was invited to join coalition governments in 2000 and again eighteen years later.

In 2000, the FPÖ entered a coalition government with the conservative Austrian People’s Party, which led to massive pushback in Austria and Europe. Egged on by the Austrian Social Democrats, which had negotiated in secret with FPÖ too, hundreds of thousands of Austrians took to the streets to demonstrate against the “fascist” government. The (then) fourteen other EU member states had tried to prevent the coalition with a strong statement, saying they would “not promote or accept any bilateral official contacts at a political level” with a government including the FPÖ. In the end, the EU-14 only boycotted the FPÖ ministers and appointed a committee of three “wise men,” which recommended that the sanctions should be lifted. Despite

<sup>1</sup> <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/05/1091582>.

mutterings from some EU member states, and the Austrian Social Democrats, the sanctions were lifted after less than a year.

When the FPÖ returned to government in 2018, there were much smaller demonstrations in Austria, and no EU government boycotted FPÖ ministers. (Mudde 2019: 49)

One might be tempted to conclude that the FPÖ and other radical right parties have moderated their ideologies and proposals, but, as Mudde shows, that was not the case. After the Great Recession of 2008, terrorist attacks in Europe, and the 2017 refugee crisis, the traditional right and some social democrats have increasingly accepted the radical right discourse on immigration, law and order, European integration, and corruption. The media has become supportive of radical right politicians and parties as well, and the social web has allowed for the proliferation of extreme right-wing subcultures.

The strengthening of the radical right is also a result of how democratization was designed in the postwar era to constrain popular sovereignty. The goal was to exorcise the ghosts of fascism and communism, whose roots allegedly laid in appeals to popular sovereignty and to “the people” by strengthening constitutional courts and safeguarding individual rights. Jan-Werner Müller (2011: 150) argues that a constrained form of democracy was created in which politics “was not supposed to be a source of meaning.” László Sólyom, president of the Hungarian Constitutional Court from 1990 to 1998 and president of Hungary from 2005 to 2010, explained:

The new constitutional courts were created out of a deep mistrust for the majoritarian institutions, which had been misused and corrupted in the Fascist and Communist regimes. In this given historical setting, the constitutional courts believed they represented the essence of the democratic change and enjoyed “revolutionary legitimacy.” Little wonder if some constitutional courts have been inclined to replace the motto “we the people” with “we the court.” (Furedi 2018: 192)

Appeals to popular sovereignty could not be buried by design in a democracy. The FPÖ, the French National Front, and other European right-wing parties first; later the movements of the squares of “the indignant” in Spain, Greece, and elsewhere; and subsequently parties of the left like Syriza, Podemos, and La France Insoumise challenged the loss of national sovereignty to supranational organizations, and the surrender of popular sovereignty to elites. Social democrats have accepted neoliberalism with the argument that there are no alternatives, and as a result politics “has become a mere issue of managing the established order, a domain reserved for experts, and popular sovereignty has been declared obsolete” (Mouffe 2018: 17). Neoliberalism and globalization led to the decline of working-class organizations, as well as of social democrats and other parties of

the left, and to the erosion of class identities. Appeals to the heterogeneous people replaced appeals to class. Yet the vague category of the people was imagined differently by the left, which constructed it as the plebs – those excluded from political and economic power by elites – and the right, which used cultural, religious, and ethnic criteria to imagine the people as an *ethnos* (Roberts 2023).

### The United States

Differently from the recent past when two pragmatic parties sought the support of swing voters who recognized the legitimacy of their rivals, entered into agreements with them, and accepted the results of elections to peacefully transfer power, currently the US is polarized. Whereas the Republican Party has become a white Christian party in the hands of extreme right activists and leaders, the Democratic Party is multiracial and more secular. Left-wing, center, and right-wing politicians and activists coexist inside the Democratic Party tent. The roots of US polarization were the successful demands of the social movements of the 1960s that democratized American culture and identity. Whereas the Democratic Party became the umbrella for activists for racial, gender, and sexual equality, the Republican Party was at the forefront of resistance to the rights to abortion, same-sex marriage, and racial equality. Political parties became ideologically polarized around race, religion, geography, cultural issues, and even “ways of life” (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018: 167). Society thus split up in cultural wars between secular and liberal understandings of the body, sexuality, and identity, and religious-traditionalist views of the family and sexual differences between men and women. Polarization is even manifested in marriage decisions. In 1960 about 4 percent of Americans said they would be displeased if their child married someone from the other party; by 2020 that number grew to about 40 percent.<sup>2</sup>

As in Europe, neoliberal globalization resulted in the bifurcation of the job market between a few well-paid jobs and low-paid service jobs that did not offer opportunities for social mobility. The end of well-paid unionized factory jobs led to a “sense of economic irrelevance, dislocation and declining material and occupational security” (Cohen 2019: 9). The logic of producerism was used to differentiate mainly white workers, who provide for their families, live off of the products of their labor, and pay taxes, from parasites of color, who allegedly do not work and make a living from government handouts. Whereas the Populist Party in the late nineteenth century branded financial elites as bloodsuckers who live off of the hard work of manual workers, since the 1960s African Americans, other people of color, immigrants, intellectuals, and state officials who do not

<sup>2</sup> [www.nytimes.com/2024/01/25/us/politics/biden-trump-presidential-election.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/25/us/politics/biden-trump-presidential-election.html).

make tangible objects became labeled freeloaders who live off of the hard work and taxes paid by white producers. The extreme right claimed that producers were also abused by liberal anti-family policies that fomented the perversion of Christian values by recognizing abortion, same-sex marriage, and LGBTQ rights. The Tea Party during Obama's administration and later Donald Trump used these discursive representations to claim to stand for the interests of white producers and for defending the family from perverts' attacks.

After four years in office Trump was able to transform the Republican Party into his own MAGA party, but, alas, he was unable to destroy democracy. He profited from deepening the polarization between white and Christian real Americans of all social classes and educational levels. Trump and his enablers in the Republican Party, Fox News, and some religious leaders raised the stakes of elections, pitching them as existential battles where the survival of an ethnic and religious group was at stake. When Trump and some Republicans refused to accept that they lost an election and claimed that they would only accept results that favored them, they put in doubt the fundamental principle of democratic alternation. After Trump supporters violently took over Congress, and many Republican legislators continued to be loyal to him, did they abandon democracy? If Trump, his enablers, and followers are fascists, why did they use elections to get to power in 2024? Is their project to protect the privileges of white citizens, restricting democracy and transforming it into what O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986: 13) defined as a limited political democracy, a "democradura," or as a soft dictatorship "dictablanda"?

### *Latin America*

The radical right arrived in Latin America, probably to stay. Bolsonaro won the Brazilian elections against the leftist Workers Party in 2018. José Antonio Kats formed the Republican Party as an alternative to the traditional right that had accepted the welfare state and promoted same-sex marriage and was defeated in a runoff election by leftist Gabriel Boric in 2021 in Chile. Libertarian and anti-gender-ideology candidate Javier Milei won the 2023 elections in Argentina. This is not the first antiestablishment right-wing populist wave in Latin America. Neoliberal populists emerged in the 1990s against traditional parties, promising the reduction of the state, self-regulation of the economy, globalization, and law and order.

Alberto Fujimori arose in a context of hyperinflation, when two guerrilla groups were on the verge of taking over the Peruvian state. He ruled for ten years, curbed hyperinflation, delivered "order and security" by defeating the guerrillas and arresting the leader of the Shining Path, and, with the excuse of