

CONTEXTS AND DEBATES

Global populism and Italy. An interview with Federico Finchelstein

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Federico Finchelstein is Professor of History at the New School for Social Research and Eugene Lang College, New York. He is one of the leading scholars on fascism and populism. Professor Finchelstein is the author of many books that have been translated into several languages, including the successful *From Fascism to Populism in History* (University of California Press, 2017). His new monograph, *Fascist Mythologies. The History and Politics of Unreason in Borges, Freud, and Schmitt*, is forthcoming in June 2022 from Columbia University Press. Given this, he is a natural starting point to discuss the global dimension of populism and its historical experiences from Latin America to Italy. Andrea Mammone, co-editor of *Modern Italy*, interviewed him in December 2021.

Question 1

In your publications you tackle populism as a global phenomenon. I wonder if you could expand upon this and tell us something about Italy's role within this framework.

I see populism as both a historical and a global phenomenon. I think it is important to highlight the transnational links between populisms, and to consider the full historical picture, looking not only at its emergence as a form of opposition, but also its later history in regimes.

Populism first developed in the nineteenth and early twentieth century in various countries, including France, Russia, the USA and the patriotic leagues of Latin America. It began as a kind of movement in opposition to regimes and elites where democracy was rather limited, or even non-existent. Later on, many populists turned from populism to fascism and authoritarian solutions, as seen in the USA, Austria and many other countries. But these early populists never achieved power within democracy. In my work, I therefore see these as pre-populist movements, a sort of early version of populism. But just as the French, American and Latin American revolutions are central to the history of liberalism, and Italian fascism is inextricably tied to the history of transnational fascism, I think the most important thing is what happened when populism came to power, and this happened after 1945, as a rather unexpected outcome of the defeat of fascism. In the new, bipolar world that emerged from the defeat of Mussolini and Hitler, the struggle between liberal democracy and true socialism displaced the 'third way' proposed by the fascists.

In this context, populism also stemmed from the end of the world wars and the tripolar world that existed before 1945. Generally speaking, the conclusion of the war also meant

the end of fascism and the authoritarian leaders who came with it, with the notable exceptions of Spain and Portugal of course (as an aside, it is worth mentioning Antonio Costa Pinto's work on the 'centre of gravity' these forms of authoritarianism provided during the interwar years). But in most places, including Asia, Latin America and the rest of Western Europe, the third option of fascism and the kind of large family of authoritarian leaders were missing, and populism – a sort of democratic reformulation of fascism – attempted to fill this void, offering a 'third way' between communism and liberalism.

In the new bipolar post-1945 world, some people were both anti-communist and anti-liberal. Of course, some people tried to continue fascism in this new context, but they failed to achieve power. The year 1945 was a very significant turning point for fascism and these neofascists, but it didn't change them much, and they sought to continue with their idea of fascism. Italy was extremely important in this context, and it influenced others, as you [Andrea Mammone] have explained in your work.

Just as some scholars (including myself, in my work on Argentina) focus on post-1945 fascism, I do something similar regarding populism: I study the people who experimented with the world of dictatorship, but then after 1945 decided to reformulate themselves in democratic terms and sought to present a new 'third way' between liberalism and communism. In many ways, they were anti-communist and anti-liberal in that they wanted to present an alternative to the Cold War paradigms, which, of course, became an authoritarian form of democracy, which I call populism in power. In other words, populism is, in my view, a form of fascism, but in a democratic key, meaning it is not 'fascism' per se. In contrast to the complexity of populism, fascism is never democratic and always aspires to dictatorship.

This is something I am very clear about whenever I talk about populism in power. We need to study populism both nationally and transnationally, because it is not a single-country issue, but rather a national expression of a global understanding of politics. In Europe, and especially in Italy with the *Uomo Qualunque* movement, there were various similar post-war attempts to transcend the main elements of fascism while keeping some of its authoritarian elements in/for the new democratic world. These populist projects in Italy were not initially successful, as they did not achieve power. The major change in this new context occurred in Latin America, where people influenced by the experience of fascism – most notably in Italy but also Nazism, Francoism and even Salazarism in Portugal – tried to refashion themselves as populists. In fact, these historical figures, like Juan Domingo Perón in Argentina or Getúlio Vargas in Brazil, were either fascist or close to fascism, often either dictators themselves or happy to collaborate with dictatorships. Perón saw himself as representing a new kind of transnational antiliberal movement that existed within democracy.

This epochal change occurred after 1945. However, unlike fascism, which is always on the right, populism can be many things: it tends to maintain its initial antiliberal ideological propositions, but also refers to a specific technique or style of politics as well. There are patterns common to both fascists and populists, and some things in populism are equally strong in fascism. But even though they share anti-liberal views, fascism lives within dictatorship, while populism cannot exist without democracy. Fascism destroys democracy, while populism restricts it or makes it more authoritarian without destroying it. If/when it does, it is no longer populism.

Populists promote the idea of a leader that directly represents the people without any kind of mediation. They have a plebiscitarian understanding of democracy, with no institutional mediation and certainly no checks and balances. Parliament is not important, because the crucial thing is that the leader represents the people. This idea of representation actually constitutes a narrowing of an authoritarian idea borrowed from fascism: in populism, the leader's supporters exclusively 'represent' the people, but that power is also

delegated to him or her by the people via electoral proceedings. This is a major difference between populism and fascism. The former creates its legitimacy from electoral outcomes, while the latter stands for permanent power.

All things considered, there are four main differences between populists and fascists, which I now see as the essential foundations of fascism, without which it cannot exist. They are:

1) The politics of xenophobia, discrimination, demonising the other and – undoubtedly – racism. Fascism is always racist. Let us return to Italian history on this point, as there is a definite lack of knowledge in this area. Many people think that Italian fascism was an exception to the racism of other fascisms, but this is entirely wrong: Italy is, of course, a country that in many regards has forgotten its racial politics. Here it is worth recalling the key works by Enzo Collotti, Marie-Anne Mattard-Bonucci, Valeria Galimi, Simon Levis Sullam and many other important historians of Italian racism. Levis Sullam's recent work, for example, draws our attention to the most genocidal dimensions of this history.

We can debate how and why the racial laws were passed, but in practice institutional racism became a key feature of the history of Fascism in 1938. These laws were also connected to the racist policies in African subjects under the Fascist Italian empire. Basically, there is a continuum. This politics of xenophobia, so central in fascism, is also part of what Jason Stanley calls the politics of us and them. This racism, discrimination and dehumanisation is one of the first elements, pillars or foundations of transnational fascism. There is no fascism without xenophobia, racism and hatred. You can have racism without fascism, but you cannot have fascism without xenophobia and deep hatred for others. In most populisms, hatred does not play such an important role. Until recently, populist politics has largely not been based on these factors.

Populists are much less brutal with their enemies – they tend to be constructed rhetorically and without clear or grave practical outcomes. They may be the anti-people and the enemies of the fatherland, yet basically nothing happens to them on the ground. The opposite is true in fascism. In populism, for example Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Vargas in Brazil, Perón in Argentina or Silvio Berlusconi in Italy, this politics of enmity is not a central element of the link between the leader and the people. There are other things, of course, like the cult of the leader and so on, but not these elements.

2) The glorification of violence, the practice of extreme violence, repression and the militarisation of politics. In other words, men in costumes resembling military uniforms pretending to be part of the military and eventually acting as a military group within the political system. These people are violent, engage in violence and value violence as a kind of ultimate example of their politics. Going back to our distinction between fascism and populism, there is no fascism without this violence and this militarisation of politics. The Italian case, as so often, is illuminating here (see Giulia Albanese's key work on the brutalisation of politics): the issue of the militarisation of politics and brutality is a central element of fascism, but it basically did not arise in populism from approximately 1945 until the early twenty-first century.

Most populist movements throughout the world include sporadic acts of violence, but you will not find militarisation or violence at the centre of their politics.

3) Propaganda and lies. This was the subject of my latest book, *A Brief History of Fascist Lies*. In fascism they are not only different, they are distinctive in both quantitative and qualitative terms. In short, fascists believe in their lies and want to change the world so it somehow resembles what they say. As the book demonstrates, fascists present a mythical notion of truth with no empirical basis, and see it as the real truth. The truth is not what they can prove, but what they would like the world to be. The same is not true of populists.

Indeed, there is a significant break with populism here, as populists in power throughout the twentieth century – after 1945 – lied more like typical politicians. Essentially, they lied but did not believe their lies. In this sense, returning to our previous examples, Perón and Berlusconi were liars like everybody else. They promised things that they could not do and so on and so forth, but they were more traditional in the way they lied, and of course, this is connected.

4) Dictatorship. This is of central importance. There is no fascism without dictatorship, although of course you can have dictatorships without fascism.

These four pillars of fascism are all interconnected, because once you have a dictatorship, the violence, hatred and lies are fused into the state apparatus and become part of a totalitarian reality.

This is a major point of demarcation. Earlier populists who had previously been dictators held elections after 1945. Perón did the opposite of what fascists do: fascists destroy democracy from within in order to create a dictatorship, at least in the most famous cases of Germany and Italy, but Perón dismantled his dictatorship, called for elections and built a democracy. Vargas went from a dictator to a democratically elected president after the war. And these are just two examples.

Dictatorship represents an important dividing line between fascism and populism; whatever you may say about any populist leaders, these people were not dictators, and whenever they lost, they accepted the results. The case of Berlusconi is interesting, because he accepted the results and then returned to being a leader in power when the opportunity arose. Populism is therefore not about permanent power. It has authoritarian dimensions, and sometimes it rules as if it were dictatorial, but whenever populists lose in elections, they leave, following the democratic rules.

Not only, then, were these four elements of fascism not a central feature of populism between 1945 and the early 2000s, they were actually antithetical to it.

The big change we have witnessed in this new century, with the new populists of the extreme right like Matteo Salvini and Giorgia Meloni in Italy, Viktor Orbán in Hungary and Vox in Spain, and more importantly figures like Donald Trump in the USA, Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and Narendra Modi in India, is that they have all returned to some of these pillars of fascism. They have promoted discrimination and the politics of xenophobia and even racism. It is impossible to understand Trump without xenophobia and racism, and it is difficult to understand the history of the Lega and other right-wing Italian populists without xenophobia either.

It is likewise impossible to understand Trump and others without their violence and militarisation of politics, or without the lies that are strongly connected to fascist methods and propaganda techniques. For example, when the Covid crisis started and Italy was at the epicentre of the pandemic, at one point, when there were just a few cases, Salvini said ‘this is coming from north Africa’. Denial and lies have also been particularly evident in the handling of the disease in the regions ruled by the Lega in northern Italy.

We saw the same with Trump and Bolsonaro, but in a more dramatic way because they had more power. For instance, Bolsonaro denied the existence of the disease and said Covid was just a mild flu, while Trump combined science with promises of miracle cures, which eventually turned into an anti-vaccine movement and science denial in the USA. These lies resulted in the deaths of many people.

What we see now in all these movements is a return to fascist patterns that previously were not typically employed by populists: hatred, violence and lies. And the question becomes truly scary when you consider the fourth element, dictatorship. I see this as a turning point, defining how and when these people cease to be populists, and actually become fascists.

One possible exception – on the left – to the idea that there is no populism without democracy is Venezuela, which has only returned to one of the four elements: there is

no xenophobia, militarisation or lies, but there certainly is dictatorship. Venezuela is not a fascist state, but it is a dictatorship; it is no longer a populist democracy, but rather a more conventional dictatorship. On the right, when you combine these four elements, you face the prospect of a new fascist dictatorship.

What can Italian history and Italian studies teach us about these global changes? I think it can tell us a lot. This is the country where fascism first came to power, and one of the first countries where populists attempted to reformulate themselves after the war (consider *Uomo Qualunque*, for example).

In my view, what happened in Italy is that, unlike what we are witnessing today, some important things initially prevented the spread of populism. Firstly, there was a clear and vivid memory of the horrible, gruesome and negative impact fascism had had on Italy. The country was destroyed. Fascism had created a very negative experience with its violence and hatred. And as well as the country's history, legal considerations also played a role, because the Italian constitution was clearly anti-fascist. The new, anti-fascist political culture that emerged and was cemented legally through the constitution, along with people's memories of fascism, meant that early Italian populism was seen as too closely tied to fascism to be successful.

We could probably explore similar situations in France, the UK and certainly West Germany at the time. On the other hand, nothing of the sort occurred in Eastern Europe, a key reason for the success of populism within democracy there. But Italy offers us a laboratory for the history of populism. As a historian of fascism and populism, my point is that Italian history is impossible to ignore.

Question 2

The year 2022 marks the 100th anniversary in Italy of the March on Rome, and democracy is again under threat in some Western nations. The 'storming' of Capitol Hill worried many people across the globe, yet some commentators avoided using the word 'fascism'. Do you see any sorts of similarities with the famous 'march' of Mussolini's camice nere?

I see a lot of continuities between the two, and even believe that they are part of the transnational memories of the extreme right. The situations are not merely comparable; the people are connected.

The March on Rome was less a *coup d'état*, and more a kind of iconic moment for fascism, but a betrayal of democracy by other political sectors lay behind it. This is one difference between the March on Rome and the storming of Capitol Hill. Although one wonders why initially these people were allowed to do the terrible things they did, eventually it was clear that they could not succeed, or at least that many key players remained on the side of democracy.

I think this is a lesson we can learn from fascism and its seizure of power: fascists succeeded not because they were popular, but because democracy was abandoned by other sectors of Italian society. And there is another issue to consider. It is hard to disagree that Trump's attempted *coup d'état* almost one year ago, where he denied the result of the elections and advocated for permanent power, was a fascist situation. But he did not succeed, and he did not do what he said he was going to do, namely go to the Capitol himself. The question is why not. Why he did not move from his aspirations to be more fascist to physically supporting his people in the coup? Was it due to cowardice, or simply because he realised that institutionally the United States would not stand a coup?

Then in Brazil we saw Bolsonaro trying to replicate Trump's model, saying that if he were to lose it would be due to fraud, and so not recognising the results. There were similar attempts in Peru, and even Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel tried to do the same by denying and not accepting the results, again not a typical populist move.

Question 3

One of the most interesting examples of contemporary populism and anti-establishment politics is the Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5S). Where would you place this party within the political system?

The M5S is difficult to place. Their politics are apparently defined by anti-politics, and they are rooted in a leader, Beppe Grillo, who provides the link between the people and the leadership. Because of Grillo's unique traits and perhaps because he cannot be a candidate, it is similar to the Peronism without Perón in post-1955 Argentina, when Perón was in Europe: they aspire to power without having a clear leader. Populism without a leader is a lame duck. On the other hand, the M5S is a very clear example of populism. They claim to be anti-institutional, and are trying to bridge what they see as a gap between the people and power. But despite wanting to be 'anti-political', they are actually extremely political and top-down in their operations. Citizens are not necessarily consulted at all. It is also interesting how they change form, entering both right-wing and left-wing coalitions. Overall, they seem to represent an almost Peronist form of politics – existing with or without a leader, with a specific style, changing political sides, allergic to criticism and claiming certain unique anti-political connotations.