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For a global history of populism: disruptions and continuities

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Abstract

The historical globality of populism seems to be a paradox, because the nationalist and populist ideologues are precisely those who accuse their enemies of being 'globalists,' and also introduce themselves as young players, without any historical background, or even as the result of a new chapter in the world history, which the current 'caudillo' in the White House has named as 'the Trump era.' In theory, the new populists are extremist nationalists who claim to want to put their countries above everything else. In practice, these nationalists constitute a new right-wing international, both due to their works and their similarities. None of this is new in the history of populism. This text analyzes the history of this continuity and points out its disruptions.

Key words populism; totalitarianism; fascism.

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Para una historia global del populismo: rupturas y continuidades

Resumen

La globalidad histórica del populismo parece ser una paradoja, pues son justamente esos ideólogos nacionalistas y populistas quienes acusan a sus enemigos de "globalistas", y quienes asimismo se presentan como actores jóvenes, sin antecedentes históricos, o incluso como el resultado de un capítulo nuevo en la historia del mundo, que el propio caudillo actual de la Casa Blanca ha denominado "la era de Trump". En teoría, los nuevos populistas son nacionalistas extremistas que afirman querer poner a sus países por encima de todo. En la práctica, esos nacionalistas forman una nueva internacional de derecha, tanto por sus obras como por sus semejanzas. Nada de esto es nuevo en la historia del populismo. Este texto analiza la historia de esta continuidad y señala sus rupturas.

Palabras clave populismo; totalitarismo; fascismo.

Por uma história global do populismo: rupturas e continuidades

Resumo

A globalidade histórica do populismo parece ser um paradoxo, pois esses ideólogos nacionalistas e populistas são justamente aqueles que acusam seus inimigos de "globalistas", e mesmo assim eles se apresentam como atores jovens, sem quaisquer antecedentes históricos, ou até como resultado de um novo capítulo na história mundial, que o atual "caudilho" da Casa Branca denominou "a era Trump". Em teoria, os novos populistas são nacionalistas extremistas que afirmam querer colocar seus países acima de tudo. Na prática, tais nacionalistas constituem uma nova internacional de direita, tanto por suas obras quanto por suas semelhanças. Nada disso é novo na história do populismo. Este texto analisa a história dessa continuidade e aponta suas rupturas.

Palavras-chave populismo; totalitarismo; fascismo.

Pour une histoire globale du populisme: ruptures et continuités

Résumé

La globalité historique du populisme semble être un paradoxe, car ces idéologues nationalistes et populistes sont précisément ceux qui accusent leurs ennemis d'être « mondialistes », et qui se présentent également comme de jeunes acteurs, sans aucun contexte historique, ou même comme le résultat d'un nouveau chapitre de l'histoire du monde, que l'actuel « caudillo » de la Maison Blanche a appelé « l'ère Trump ». En théorie, les nouveaux populistes sont des nationalistes extrémistes qui prétendent vouloir mettre leur pays au-dessus de tout. En pratique, ces nationalistes constituent une nouvelle internationale de droite, tant pour leurs œuvres que pour leurs similitudes. Rien de tout cela n'est nouveau dans l'histoire du populisme. Ce texte analyse l'histoire de cette continuité et souligne ses ruptures.

Mots-clés populisme; totalitarisme; fascisme.

Global populisms

If we start at the end, using the most recent chapter in the history of populism, it is clear that the European tours undertaken by the until recently Trumpism's 'gray brain,' i.e. Steve Bannon, only confirmed the globalizing nature of far-right-wing populism. But this does not imply that this is a new history, or that it has even been inaugurated with the fall of the Berlin Wall. The historical globality of populism seems to be a paradox, because the nationalist and populist ideologues are precisely those who accuse their enemies of being 'globalists,' and also introduce themselves as young players, without any historical background, or even as the result of a new chapter in the world history, which the current 'caudillo' in the White House has named as 'the Trump era.' In theory, the new populists are extremist nationalists who claim to want to put their countries above everything else. In practice, these nationalists constitute a new right-wing international, both due to their works and their similarities.

None of this is new in the history of populism. The classic Peronism of Juan Domingo Perón in Argentina tried (and failed) by presenting the third justicialist route as the solution to the world's problems, particularly in the bipolar world during the Cold War. More recently, Venezuelan Chavismo tried to make its leader the architect and symbol of a new way of doing politics (De La Torre, 2017a, 2017b)[1] . Before them, fascism had also tried to generate a 'fascist international.' Specifically, fascism crossed the Atlantic and went beyond Latin America, too, reaching countries like China, India, or Syria[2] . After the global defeat of fascisms, many former fascists and militants of dictatorships tried to maintain the anti-liberal tradition through democratic means. That opened room for the arrival of populism to power as a new way of governing the nation (Finchelstein, 2017).

Populism is not fascism, and is often thought of as its overcoming. Historically, fascism has been adequately contextualized as, above all, a political dictatorship type that often emerges within democracy to destroy it. Historically, populism has done the opposite. It has often stemmed from other authoritarian experiences, including dictatorship, and in most cases it has distorted democracies, minimizing their qualities, but never, or almost never, destroying them. Populism is a democracy type grounded in the notion of a leader who, without institutional mediations, tries to legitimize his voice through people's voice. The idea of bringing the people and the leader together is key. Nevertheless, this has authoritarian implications, but it begins with a democratic premise: to establish a closer

1 On global populism, see Finchelstein and Urbinati (2018). On Europe, see McDonnell and Werner (2019).

2 On fascist internationalism, see Herren (2016). On fascist international, see Ledeen (1972); Sabatini (1997); Cuzzi (2005). On transnational fascism, see Zachariah (2014); Clinton (2017); Hofmann (2015); Patel and Reichardt (2016). For the period after 1945, see Mammone (2015); Ávila (2016); Albanese and Del Hierro (2016).

relationship between those who took office and the people[3] . Populism emerges as an attempt at direct democracy without mediation. After starting with the premise of bringing people closer to power when still in the opposition, once he takes office, the leader does not fulfill his promise. The result is that there is a leader who takes office and often claims that his is people's voice, but when exercising power, he does what he wants and does not talk to anyone about it. The leader speaks on behalf of the people, and makes decisions for it.

So, what is populism? Historically, it is an authoritarian and anti-liberal democracy type. In this sense, populism cannot be explained only by changes that occurred after the fall of the wall in Europe and the United States of America (USA), since it belongs to a global and long-term history. In my study, I propose a historical approach to what it has represented in history. After addressing many cases, I found a couple of patterns that prevail over time in this vertical rethinking of democracy that populism is. To begin with, populism implies an authoritarian view of democracy that reformulated the legacy of fascism after 1945 to combine it with various democratic procedures. Populism exercising power is a post-fascism type that rethinks fascism for democratic times. In other words, it is fascism adapted to a democratic rationale and context (Finchelstein, 2017).

First encounters close to the third position

"I had gone to Italy not to see the Leaning Tower [in Pisa], but other things more important existing in Italy" (Perón, 1976, pp. 27-29). According to General Perón, the actual reasons for his visit to that country, in 1939, were Benito Mussolini and fascism. The same reasons apply to his admiration for Adolf Hitler and his tour through Nazi Germany: "I did not go to Berlin only because of the Brandenburg Gate" (Perón, 1976, pp. 27-29). In fact, these visits, as a young Argentine officer, and his personal remarks on fascism exercising power, were key in his reformulation of fascism, which led to the creation of the first populist regime in history. As for Mussolini, Perón made up a personal encounter with the *Duce*. In fact, he had only watched Mussolini from a distance, while the Italian leader delivered a major war speech from the balcony of the Palazzo Venezia.

This personal fantasy-like encounter that Perón told many years later, in the 1970s, is interesting precisely because it shows the fascist genealogies of the first populist regime, but also its critical differences. Among so many feasible genealogies why, at the end of his life, did the Argentine leader come back to fascism through his memory as a legitimizing way? Perón saw in fascist dictatorships an anti-liberal political representation. That was a new popular legitimacy type. A sovereignty that combined technocratic corporate planning

3 For some recent key studies on populism, see Urbinati (2019); Berezin (2019); Arato (2016); De la Torre (2017c); Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017); Müller (2016).

with in-depth vertical leadership. Perón concluded that even if the enforcement means could have been faulty, the fascist phenomenon represented a powerful third supranational position between American capitalism and Soviet socialism. The Argentine leader took lessons on fascism to Latin America, thinking that people's role, the leader and the State in fascism, could influence the 'political shape of the future.' He had found in defeated fascisms a study object to think of the 'true social democracy.' After Hitler and Mussolini's death, Perón explained that 'popular democracy' no longer existed 'in the West': "that is what I found out studying the old European institutions and when I returned to my country, I said to myself 'we are not going to the 19th century along with imperialist capitalist democracies: let's go to the 20th century along with social democracies." Talking of social democracy, the Argentine leader did not have in mind the old European social democratic patterns, but a new version, intended for post-war times, of social nationalism: "and this is how I created the whole social doctrine and launched it towards the 21st century" (Perón, 1976, pp. 27-29).

Populist modernity

With the defeat of fascism, a new populist modernity emerged. After the war, populism rethought the anti-Enlightenment legacies for the Cold War era, and this was a historical turning point. By 1945, populism represented a post-fascist continuation of fascism, but also a renunciation of some of its defining dictatorial dimensions.

It was in Latin America that modern democratic populism became a regime for the first time in history, and it was originally constituted as a post-fascist response to the left-wing and liberalism. However, it did not constitute a radical break with the past, and populism was not engendered outside a historical continuum. Within the period from the late 19th century to the interwar years, previous and proto-manifestations of populism emerged in countries like the USA, Russia, Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, and France. Those movements and leaders spoke on behalf of the people as a single and homogeneous entity. By the left- and the right-wing, they opposed both the oligarchies and elites, but overall they did not oppose liberal democracy as a whole. The absolute rejection of democracy came after World War I, when fascism fused the pre-populist left- and right-wing tendencies with an extremist, anti-liberal, and anti-communist ideology. After 1945, in a radically different context, modern populism returned to its pre-fascist roots, even without forgetting the lessons of the fascist experience.

As post-fascism, populism emerged as an authoritarian democracy type for the Cold War world. It intended to adapt the totalitarian version of politics to the hegemony of postwar democratic representation, giving rise once again to supranational political alliances against constitutional democracy. This transformation took place predominantly in Latin

America after the global fall of fascism, in 1945, and much later it became widespread in Europe after the fall of real socialism, in 1989. Populism began by recognizing that fascism was over and entered the history books, it was not a current reality anymore. According to General Perón, that was "an unrepeatable phenomenon, a classic style to define a precise and determined time." Although he pitied the loss of 'poor Italy' and Mussolini's fascism, he did not intend to imitate the defeated past. He wanted to free Peronism from the accusation of fascism, and the result was a version of post-fascist, authoritarian, and anti-liberal democracy (Perón, 2001, p. 65). As the Argentine leader, but many years later, the Italian neo-fascists reached a similar conclusion. Thus, Gianfranco Fini, leader of the neo-fascist Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI), tried to turn it into a populist formation, and argued, in 1993, that fascism was irreversibly a matter of the past: "like all Italians, we are not neo-fascists, but post-fascists" (Griffin, 2017, p. 15)[4] .

Although populism as a political regime often suppressed political rights, sometimes it also increased social rights; at the same time, it put limits on the most radical emancipatory combinations of both. This specific and post-fascist historicity of populism is often diluted in some theoretical interpretations, including those approaches that are for or against the populist phenomenon. In addition, these theoretical views come up with a subject without history. They also impose Eurocentric opinions, or the idea of absolute U.S. exceptionality. Against these ahistorical theories, full of prejudices, which regard populism as an exclusively European or American phenomenon that emerged only after 1989, there is a need to make a global reading of its historical routes.

Populism is the opposite of pluralism in politics. It speaks on behalf of an imaginary majority, and rejects all opinions considered as a part of the minority. Especially in its right-wing version, its enemies often encompass religious and ethnic minorities, and always implicate the independent press. Perón spoke on behalf of the people and fancied himself as the antithesis of the elites. Like Jean-Marie Le Pen, Jair Bolsonaro, Donald Trump, and many other current leaders, the Argentine general highlighted the contrast between his own persona and traditional politics. He represented anti-politics, and shaped his own role in messianic terms. He assigned the titanic task of radically changing Argentina to himself, providing it with a new historical base and reestablishing it in a moment of terminal crisis. Perón also introduced his movement as full of transnational dimensions. His populism had no borders. That was not specific to Argentina or Latin America, but rather a general condition of populism in its history and its theory. Populism is a way of thinking of universal politics that, while conceived in a nationalist way, provides responses to a global situation. It brings national anti-liberal solutions to the universal issue of the crisis of representation in democracy. According to the populists, there is no contradiction between nationalism and

4 On post-fascism and Peronism, see my books *Transatlantic fascism* (Finchelstein, 2010) and *The ideological origins of the dirty war* (Finchelstein, 2014, chapter 4).

supranational ties. In fact, by turning transnational fascism into a post-war transnational post-fascist phenomenon, the first populist regime in history tried to create a new third global position.

Populisms without borders

Perón (1951, pp. 203-208) announced the advent of "the peoples' hour," and warned that there were two alternatives for the world's direction. The first encompassed the main opponents in the new bipolar world, communism and capitalism. The second was the people's government by its true representative: Peronism, i.e. himself. Both capitalism and communism were "imperialist systems of human exploitation." Only Peronism, and its global partners and counterparts, represented social justice for the peoples and their "liberation." Against the two "power-usurping" systems, the "third position" guaranteed economic independence and political sovereignty for nations and their peoples. This third way marked an "evolution" that took place at a global level. The people, finally, took "the government in its hands." Perón thought that this populism would see the light in Europe two decades later than in Latin America. If, before 1945, Argentina had copied Europe, now the leading country was Argentina, which wanted to anticipate: "we are going to get ahead and do what is needed so that when the announced political and social events occur in Europe, we are firmly rooted in our ideology" (Perón, 1976, pp. 27-29).

Peronism promoted its model internationally, achieving debatable success and limited results (Semán, 2017; Zanatta, 2013). Although Peronism tried to be the anchor of a new international movement and its leader highlighted in a special manner the need for a Latin American continental integration, as well as for a worldwide liberation from both communism and "plutocracy," it maintained its ambiguity in face of the possibility to play the leading role in such a struggle. Perón later acknowledged that, when he took power, he got closer to kindred regimes, such as Getúlio Vargas,' in Brazil; but he also emphasized his ties to Francisco Franco's dictatorship. In fact, the Argentine leader stressed that his third position represented a new supranational resurgence against "demo-liberalism" and communism, which he regarded as a natural result of the first. Perón's was a global reaction against the victors in World War II. It was an early and symptomatic response to a context of profound change, in face of the triumph of liberalism and communism, as well as a call for a new path contrary to those: the peoples reacted against those who had deprived them of power. Through Peronism, the people have finally come back to power. The peoples from Latin America, Europe, Asia, and Africa faced the "iron" and "dollar" curtains. In fact, Perón dreamed of a new global reaction of the people against the U.S. and Soviet blocs. He even thought that American liberalism and Russian communism might be overwhelmed by this new liberation of peoples. In a context where he was convinced of an imminent

World War III, Perón assured his listeners that liberal democracy and communism fought for their survival. He said that when they were "united, they were dangerous, but their clash will give rise to their very weakness." The peoples of the world opposed these two imperialisms and their victory would consist in not opposing the Cold War. While Russia and the USA represented the governments that opposed the people's, in 1946 Argentina "announced to the world that its government will do what its people want" (Perón, 1951, pp. 203-208). Particularly for Latin America, Perón claimed that open borders were a necessity, in his words, "borders are superfluous;" he said: "and I am even more daring in this regard, because in all opportunities I have argued that in this part of the world the borders are excessive" (Perón, 2016, p. 66).

Peron's view of a new global hegemony for what we know today as *classic populism*, of course, never came true. But that messianic view of a moment of break and transcendental change in the history of politics is a major key to think of the future populist disruptions, such as those generated after 1989, as well as that of 2016, marked by the triumph of Donald Trump in the USA. In 1989, the fall of the Berlin Wall paved the way for future European populisms, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, and also reformulated the Latin American populist tradition through the emergence of the new neoliberal populisms in Argentina, Brazil, Peru, Ecuador, and other countries. On its turn, the 1945 populist disruption left a significant mark on the road followed by the first populisms of the 21st century in Latin America. In this regard, Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez stated, in February 2005, that "Perón said we were at the peoples' hour. Unfortunately those battles were extinguished, but they were not lost, one thing is seeing they momentarily fade, but another thing is seeing they fade away forever." Chávez (2005) thus highlighted the centrality of supranational dimensions of classic Latin American populism and regarded this old Perón's wave as similar to the 21st century's 'new wave.'

If Perón was the main leader of the 20th century populism, and Chavez was his disciple and late prototype, the new European and American right-wing trend represents a renewed wave of populism, which seems to dominate the early 21st century. This time, however, populism resumes some fascist themes that Perón had rejected, in line with his idea of a global populism that overcomes fascism. Trumpism, and its European counterparts, such as the French woman Marine Le Pen, Bolsonaro in Brazil, the Italian Lega, or the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany come back to xenophobia in a way that the Latin American leader would never have imagined. In Europe we may speak of a true populist international, while in Latin America the 'Bolsonaro effect' gains momentum, both in the traditional neoliberal right-wing and in the populist right-wing[5] .

5 For Europe, see McDonnell and Werner (2019); Mammone (2018). See also, for other contexts: Moffitt (2016); De la Torre (2018).

While fascist violence and racism represented the past, the future would be different. As Perón stated in 1945, before being elected and in a clear rejection of political violence, "we do not win through violence; we win through intelligence and organization" (Perón, 1946, p. 183). Populism was an electoral type of authoritarian democracy that was inspired by, but at the same time rejected, fascist dictatorship. After 1945, this historical relationship between fascism and populism gave rise to the first post-fascist notions of authoritarian anti-liberal democracy.

On past and present times

The new right-wing populist alliances, which often encompass the fascists, show how the most recent right-wing populism has reduced the post-fascist dimensions of postwar populism. Historically, the populists wanted to detach from the 'methods' of fascism. But, for instance, both in the case of Trumpism and that of the National Front, Bolsonarism, or the Italian populists, the existence of a coalition between various neo-fascist elements and populist leaders may be addressed. These relations are both national and supranational. The new populisms represent a break with their post-fascist predecessors, like Perón. The early populisms that took office fused democracy with authoritarianism, but overall they did so without falling into dictatorial and racist fascism. This estrangement from dictatorship and racism defined back then, and until recently, contemporary populism. Things changed in the Trump's era. Thus, the turning point represented by 2016 is of greater importance than 1989 for the global history of populism.

However, populists are also racist; and they are overtly so (literally) beyond their own borders. The prospective triumph of populism that Perón foretell at a global level has increasingly resembled the defeated fascism. A fascism that the Argentine general and his global counterparts believed to have overcome.

Currently, we have experienced a new globalization of xenophobia and anti-politics. On one of his quasi-triumphant European tours, Steve Bannon addressed the French National Front convention, in March 2018. Within that framework, he told his listeners that they entered "a world movement larger than France, Italy, Hungary, or Poland." He asked them to behave accordingly: "let them call you racist, xenophobic, or whatever. Use it as a medal of honor" (Stanley, 2018). What was once considered as an insult now became a program. Among the post-fascist listeners from France there was their leader Marine Le Pen, who had come second in the 2017 French presidential elections, and, in her turn, she had celebrated Trump's victory as part of 'a global revolution.'

At that time, in late 2016, when populism reached its historic and global peak in the White House, other populists echoed the transnational proportions of that anti-political victory. The Italian man Beppe Grillo then argued that Trump's victory was a turning point

in world history: “this has been a big ‘fuck off!’ Trump has won an incredible victory.” In turn, according to Le Pen, Trump’s victory represented the triumph of people’s will over the elites. It was about building “a new world destined to replace the old one” (Finchelstein, 2017, p. 172). Like Jair Bolsonaro, Matteo Salvini, and many others, Marine Le Pen regarded her own position as similar to the true patriots’: “the division is no longer between right- and left-wing [but] between patriot and globalist” (Finchelstein, 2017, p. 158). Trump would repeat the same thing in his speech at the United Nations (UN) in 2019: “the future does not belong to the globalists. The future belongs to the patriots” (Gearan & Kim, 2019).

In the same way how Rome and Berlin became models for the fascists, or Buenos Aires or Caracas did so for the populists in Latin America, the xenophobic presidential campaign and the current Trump administration have soon become a source of recognition for the populists from around the world. Washington is today the beacon that illuminates the populist universe. Far-right-wing populist leaders like Matteo Salvini, Marine Le Pen, and Bolsonaro praise Trumpist voters for opposing traditional forms of democratic representation and their elite culture. They are part of a new global reaction against the forms of deliberative democracy and propose a country model based on repudiation of those who are, behave, or think differently.

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