Fascism and populism

Federico Finchelstein

A new populist modernity was born with the defeat of fascism. After the war, populism in power reformulated the legacies of the “anti-enlightenment” for the Cold War era and this historical turning first happened in Latin America with Argentine Peronism. (Sternhell, 2010; Urbinati, 2014; De La Torre, 2010; Laclau, 2005; Rein, 2012; Arato, 2016.) By 1945, populism represented a continuation of fascism but also a renunciation of some of its defining dictatorial dimensions. Populism reformulated fascism to the extent, that, as in the case of Peronism, it became a fully differentiated “ism”; one that was, and is, at the same time rooted in electoral democracy and also displays a tendency to reject democratic diversity.

Modern democratic populism was originally constituted as a post-fascist response to the left. However, it was not a radical break with the past, and populism was not engendered outside a historical continuum. The period from the end of the nineteenth century to the interwar years saw the emergence of pre and proto-forms of populism in places as far as the United States, Russia, Mexico, Argentina, Brazil and France. These movements and leaders spoke in the name of the people as one single entity. From the left and from the right, they opposed oligarchies and elites but they did not generally contest liberal democracy tout court. This contestation of democracy came after World War I, when fascism fused pre-populist tendencies of left and right with a radical anti-liberal and anti-communist ideology, even leading some historians to talk about fascist populist dictatorships (Eley, 2016; Fritzsche, 2016). After 1945, in a radically changed context, modern populism returned to its pre-fascist roots but without forgetting the lessons from the experience of fascism.

As post-fascism, populism emerged as a form of authoritarian democracy for the Cold War world; one that could adapt the totalitarian version of politics to the post-war hegemony of democratic representation. This transformation was first predominant in Latin America after the global fall of fascism and much later became widespread in Europe after the fall of real socialism. Populism started with the recognition that fascism is over and it is part of history, not the present. For General Perón, the leader of the first modern populist regime in history, fascism was “an unrepeatable phenomenon, a classic style to define a precise and determined epoch.” As much as Argentine leader Juan Domingo Perón mourned the loss of fascism, he did not want to imitate the defeated past. He wanted to free Peronism from the charge of fascism and the result was a post-fascist, authoritarian and anti-liberal version of democracy.
Like the Argentine leader but many years later, Italian neo-fascists arrived at a similar conclusion. Thus, Gianfranco Fini, the Italian leader of the neo-fascist Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI), who in his attempt to morph it into a populist formation argued in 1993 that fascism was irreversible, consigned to the past, “Like all Italians we are not neo-fascists, but post-fascists” (cited in Griffin, 2017).

While populism often curtailed political rights, it also at times expanded social rights; and at the same time, it put limits on the more radical emancipatory combinations of both. This specific post-fascist historicity of populism is often lost in varied theoretical reconfigurations, including those approaches that are in favor of or against the populist phenomenon. Moreover, these theoretical views present a subject without history. They also enforce American or Euro-centric views. Against this normative, ahistorical idea of populism as an exclusive European or American phenomenon, I propose a global reading of its historical itineraries. Disputing generic theoretical definitions that reduce populism to a single sentence, I stress the need for returning populism to history, specifically its ambiguous relation with fascism, and especially in Latin America. Thus, by emphasizing the fascist genealogy of populism and how it was created and changed over time, I put forward a historical framework that moves away from standard dichotomies between the global north and the global south. In this sense Donald Trump and Hugo Chávez, Marine Le Pen in France or Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey are practically, especially in their style, and also theoretically connected with Hitler and Mussolini at the same time that they represent a radical break with classic fascist politics. They are not fascists but their politics share a fascist historical background. This historical relationship between fascism and populism first appeared in Latin America and it later spread to the rest of the world.

The emergence of modern populism in Latin America

After the fall of European fascisms in 1945, a modern populist regime emerged first in Latin America. To be sure, there were important interwar precedents such as Cardenism in Mexico (1934–1940), Yrigoyenismo in Argentina (1916–1922 and 1928–1930) and the first era of Vargism in Brazil (1930–1945). Another important precedent is the Peruvian APRA party led by Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre from the 1920s onwards. But all these experiments eventually turned out to be responses that were greatly shaped by the different national, regional and global contexts that preceded the emerging post-war order. These proto-populist regimes and movements were very different from the pre-populist movements that had been more typical of the European, American and Latin American cases before the Great War. Proto-populisms were first marked by the realities of revolution and counter-revolution, including the centrality of the Mexican and Soviet revolutions, the then recent legacies of oligarchic republics, and subsequently by anti-colonialist struggles and the global war between fascism and anti-fascism.

These forms of proto-populism were quite different from each other but none of them considered that liberalism was their main enemy. They focused instead on transcending the untouched legacies of the oligarchic states that had preceded them. These proto-populist regimes presented themselves as nationally inspired “correctives” to the old forms of Latin American liberal democracy. They wanted to correct liberalism but never fully broke with it. They were keen to stress the limits of those democratic models for young nations in search of autonomy.

In Argentina, the radical proto-populism of Yrigoyenismo (between 1912 and 1930) led to the expansion of political rights but only for men and in the context of a system that combined charismatic leadership, a strong executive, the expansion of the army’s role in handling social
unrest with sporadic but significantly high levels of anti-leftist repression in Patagonia, Buenos Aires, and other places. In Mexico proto-populism presented an authoritarian system where elections did play a role but within local contexts and especially in terms of intra-party competition. At the same time, Mexican proto-populism incorporated significant sectors of the population (urban sectors, peasants, and the working class), especially through the party and the corporate structure of the state. There were similar developments in Brazil under Vargas. But Vargas clearly situated himself to the right of the political spectrum creating a corporatist dictatorship from 1937 to 1945. Cardenism and Varguism saw themselves as revolutionary actors from above. Unlike, modern democratic populism (from Peronism to Trumpism and Lepenism), these proto-populisms witnessed, and at times produced, high levels of political violence. Both Cardenism and the first Varguism eventually opposed global fascism and locally repressed the fascists and the extreme right. In Brazil, the first Varguist phase was for the most part a dictatorship that actually destroyed the elitist formal democracy that had preceded it. In Mexico, the cardenista period led to the institutionalization of one-party rule, a strong but temporally limited executive and the practical minimization of electoral democracy. The Mexican and Brazilian proto-populist regimes cannot be considered as fully democratic as modern democratic populism would be after 1945. And yet, much more so than Argentine Yrigoyenismo, Mexico and Brazil established important precedents for the populist future, including new forms of economic nationalism and the consequent incorporation of urban working classes into the authoritarian pact. The proto-populism that was even closer to what modern populism would be after the post-war was the case of Aprismo in Peru.

In this Andean nation, populism appeared in proto-populist fashion in the interwar years. The APRA movement was not only very active in Peru but also, to a minor extent in other parts of Latin America as an urban party, an alliance of workers, students and middle-class intellectuals, a coalition that the leader called “the union of the arm and the brains.” The nexus between them was increasingly tied together through the mythical leadership of Haya de la Torre. The Peruvian leader presented APRA and his own leadership as the way to defeat the enemies from within and from without. APRA became an actual party in the early 1930s and it often switched from democratic procedures in democratic times to armed insurgent in dictatorial ones. In these early years, as Carlos de la Torre explains, it is possible to note a “moralism, religiosity, and intransigence that characterize populist discourses.” Aprismo also featured the me-or-the-highway logic of populist contestation and even included racist criticism of its opponents (as it would be later the case with Gaitanismo in Colombia). Starting in 1931 and most definitely after 1945 with the emergence of the early Cold War, it was singularly clear that Aprismo was a Peruvian nationalist proto-populist organization, despite its Latin Americanist rhetoric. It put forward a post-war anti-imperialist front against both communism and liberalism and under the vertical leadership of Haya who was officially defined: “as the Jefe Máximo,” the chief interpreter of the “vague and imprecise desires of the multitude” (Stein, 1980; Haya De La Torre, 1995). Even when some historians have dubbed it the first Latin American populism, before the post-war Aprismo was attached to a more traditional model multi-class paternalism and had a more diffuse idea of populist popular sovereignty, a more traditional link between the leader and the people and a much less nationalist perspective.

All in all, these proto-populisms (Cardenism, the first Varguism, Yrigoyenismo and Aprismo) constitute significant, influential and clear precedents to the modern populisms that emerged after 1945, and especially to Peronism.

Argentine Peronism was the first attempt to “democratize” the anti-liberal legacies of fascism for the Cold War context. Others, including the second phase of Varguism, the Bolivian revolution, Gaitanismo in Colombia and the post-war presidencies of José María Velasco Ibarra
in Ecuador soon followed it. After 1945, proto-populist movements like Aprismo in Peru and Betancourism in Venezuela became modern populist formations of the Cold War, increasingly combining anti-communist stances, strong polarization and negative views of opponents as enemies with a critique of liberalism and strong doses of egalitarianism. Overall, these new democratic populist regimes and movements wanted to challenge the liberal understandings of democracy.

The precedents of proto-populisms of Mexico, Argentina, Peru and Brazil were deeply influential, and in countries like Argentina, they were combined after 1945 with more proper pre-populist and fascist legacies. This does not mean that fascism was as pervasive in the rest of Latin America, as it had been in Argentina. The long-term history of liberalism in power in most of Latin America, which was longer than in other places where fascism emerged as a regime (e.g., Germany, Italy and Spain) constitutes a peculiarity of most Latin American cases of populism: even in places with most violent outcomes like Colombia, the liberal rules of the political game were too entrenched to be completely eliminated. Argentina was a different matter. The country witnessed an attack against the liberal tradition that was not equaled in other Latin American countries.

In the new context when liberal democracy had reemerged as the most legitimate form of government in the West, fascists worldwide, but specially and originally in Argentina, went back to fascism’s pre-populist roots and organically reframed them for the post-war context. As a dictatorial outcome of modern democracy, fascism was rooted in the previous experiences of authoritarian pre-populist reactions to democracy from the early Bonapartism of nineteenth-century France, to boulangerism, to the social Christian anti-Semitism of Karl Lueger in fin-de-siècle Vienna. But once in power, starting in 1922 in Italy and in 1933 in Germany, fascism destroyed democracy from within. Fascists worldwide put forward similar proposals. After their global defeat in 1945, many fascists, and global right anti-communists, realized that, in order to gain legitimacy, fascism could no longer be rooted in dictatorship. This signaled the emergence of modern populism as we know it today. The genealogy of modern populism is rooted in this radical attempt to reinscribe the fascist tradition, and, more generally, to move away from extremist dictatorial nationalism.

For the fascists that had survived the demise of the fascist regimes, the Cold War presented a new dichotomy between the liberal-democratic forms of capitalism and soviet communism. They wanted to escape this perceived dichotomy. Modern populism first emerged as a proposed third position aiming to overcome the Cold War dilemma between communism and liberalism. In its first historical instantiation, (that is, the first historical experience where this “democratic” rethinking of fascism took place) populism was called Peronism. Rather than adopting a pre-formatted version of Cold War neofascism, Peronism in Argentina was the first movement that attempted to adapt the legacy of fascism to a novel democratic framework and represented the first example of a modern populist movement and regime.

Peronism was fascism adapted to democratic times. This was also the case for other examples of the Latin American populism of the 1940s in Latin America. The Brazilian Getúlio Vargas, Ecuadorian José María Velasco Ibarra and the Colombian leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán were all accused of being fascist and Peronists. But in fact, they represented a national populist response to the limitations of democracy in their countries. This response involved denunciations of existing limits to social rights and also an authoritarian way of identifying the people and the nation with their own personas and agendas.

Like Perón, Vargas has ruled an anti-communist dictatorial regime (in his case the Estado Novo, 1937–1945) but he then reconverted to democratic procedures and won the presidential elections in 1951. This “new Vargas era” was essentially populist. Vargas had defined
his previous dictatorial ways as the single alternative to the interwar threat of civil war. But the times were changing. Now Vargas was a democratic politician. He reformulated the terms of his dictatorial Estado Novo for a new democratic context. Like Perón, Vargas rejected political and economic liberalism and like Perón, he was an anti-communist. His policies equally reflected a manipulation of the working classes but also a perceptive reading and a means of expressing and acting upon their concerns. In other words, varguismo combined authoritarianism with social democratization. As many of his Latin American peers, Vargas was accused of being the “Brazilian Perón” but his stress on a Brazilian way of responding to that country’s crisis of hegemony was expectedly much related to Brazilian developments than to Argentine ones (Skidmore, 1994, 245, 257; 1967, 74, 75, 132, 133; Weffort, 1998, 136–143).

Similar developments happened in Colombia where the surge of populism was the unexpected consequence of a widely extended Latin American tradition of excluding popular sectors from political decision-making. As elsewhere in the region, post-war populism emerged in Colombia as a result of a popular lack of political representation, the existence of a big divide between the elites and most citizens, and social inequality. Jorge Eliecer Gaitán, like Perón, had visited fascist Italy and were influenced by fascism. Gaitán read his thesis in front of Mussolini’s entire cabinet but like Perón, Gaitán also moved to the left, combining unitary ideas of the people to address a majority of citizens who were disenfranchised and a push for social rights with a fascist style. Gaitán felt an affinity with the Peronist “third position” between capitalism and communism. He also stressed the need for a “defensive nationalism” against imperialism. This populist reformulation was either misunderstood as a “fascism of the left” by the conservatives or the fascism of Hitler and Mussolini by the liberals and the left. Thus, like Perón, Gaitán was often accused of being a fascist and also charged with being a Peronist. But as it was the case with the Argentine leader, Gaitán was not a fascist but actually one of the key politicians that adapted older ideas for the new democratic realities, especially after 1945. As Enrique Peruzzotti argues (Peruzzotti, 2008, 97–125), populists saw in electoral procedures one of the constitutive elements of their political legitimacy. In this, they sharply differed from the fascists, who did ascribe not any true legitimacy to elections and stressed the absolute need of dictatorship. Gaitán does not fit this latter fascist pattern. His assassination in 1948 halted a formidable political career and also more importantly the immediate future of populism in Colombia, turning this country into a gruesome civil war and eventually its only and brief modern military dictatorship.

In Ecuador, a fascist party that was influenced by the Falange supported Velasco Ibarra in his third presidency (1952–1956). Similar parties had supported Perón’s rise to power. Initially, workers and Catholic sectors that were fiercely anti-communists supported Velasco. But as with Peronism, Ecuadorian populism mixed left and right-wing ideas and followers. Velasco’s return to power in 1944 was eventually supported by leftists and rightists who claimed to be supporters of the Allies in the Second World War. As Carlos de la Torre notes, Velasco Ibarra’s thinking on democracy was influenced by Simon Bolívar’s pessimism about democracy, idealized strong executives and even temporary dictatorship. These views were also reinforced by his longstanding but not mimetic admiration of Peronism. Velasco Ibarra was exiled in Buenos Aires during some of the years of classic Peronism. Leaders like Perón, Gaitán and Velasco Ibarra transformed political arguments into all-or-nothing fights for a new moral order. This is what De la Torre calls the “transmutation of politics into ethics or even into eschatological redemption.” Acting and speaking in the name of the people classic populism emerged at a time, where democratic procedures were weak. They provided a voice to those that felt without representation but at the expense of negating the right of dissent and morphing the voice
of the leader into the “source of all virtue” (De La Torre, 2010, 28–70). Similar developments happened in Peru, Bolivia and Venezuela. These countries also experienced deep changes after the end of the World War II. In fact, if leaders like Victor Raúl Haya de la Torre in Peru and Rómulo Betancourt in Venezuela had been initially close to communism, especially after 1945, they clearly switched to the populist mix of vertical anti-liberal leadership and political demands for social change. Like Gaitán, Haya never reached power but unlike the Colombian leader who was assassinated in 1948, Haya went into exile and remained a key actor of Peruvian politics. Banned in Peru he demanded the return of electoral participation for him and his followers. His post-war populism combined decreasing calls for social reform with an even increasing myth of the charismatic leader, and a sincere unconditional support for the United States in its Cold War against communism and alliance with its previous oligarchic enemies (Halperin Donghi, 1994, 485).

Populism in Bolivia, as in Argentina, and as it would be the case in Venezuela, first reached power through to its participation in a military dictatorship. The dictator and leader of the Junta Major Gualberto Villarroel, and Víctor Paz Estenssoro the leader of the MNR or Revolutionary Nationalist Movement had close links with the Argentine military Junta of the GOU led by Juan Colonel Perón in Buenos Aires. As it was the case with Perón, the United States equated the Bolivian Junta with the coming of fascism to Latin America. To be sure, it is probable that the Argentines had some role in the Bolivian coup. But the most important features of the Bolivian coup were not fascist but proto-populist. Transnational connections were indeed important but the Bolivian events had specific national roots that pointed in the direction of a national version of Bolivian populism. As Laura Gotkowitz (2007) explains: the MNR–supported dictatorship but also put forward a socially inclusive vision of a “mestizo nation.” This was a vertical nationalist, and at times xenophobic, model for social inclusion that at the same time that it stressed national unity, ascribing legitimacy to the country’s majority of Indians and mestizos, it also seek to control this majority “that it was pressing its demands on the state.” The Villarroel-MNR dictatorship severely limited political rights, and even expanded some national fascist tendencies, resorting to political assassinations and imprisonment of members of the left-wing opposition. Eventually the dictator was killed by a mob and the MRN leadership was exiled after 1946. Just some five years later, the MNR had renounced its fascism, and adopted a third way position that moved it clearly to the left of the Bolivian political landscape. Victor Paz Estenssoro was now the leader of a worker supported nationalist revolutionary party. Against it were the military and the Bolivian right under the banner of the Bolivian Falange. It was in this early post-war moment that the MNR came to power in 1952 on its own but once again not directly through electoral procedures. In fact, the MNR won elections in 1951 in the limited democracy that restricted the votes to only a minority of alphabetized individuals. In any case, a dictatorial junta blocked its access to power. In 1952, the MNR led a revolution in the name of the people and their votes. By that time it had left behind its previous filo-fascist roots and had incorporated a new working-class base with Marxist and Trotskyists roots. The MNR revolution had extensive urban and rural roots and it led to a radical increase in the Bolivians participation in the politics of their country, including universal suffrage, nationalization of the tin mines and agrarian reform. Although it presented its actions, as a “blow” to the oligarchy the MNR did not link “citizens’ rights with broader ideas of liberty and equality, nor did it link them with the history of participatory struggles to free the nation from colonial bonds.” The agrarian reform itself was of “reformist” nature; it gave preference to private rather than communal possession of the land (before the reform 6% of land owners possessed 92% of developed lands and after it 20% of the lands
were redistributed.) Still, it significantly changed land distribution in one Latin America’s most unequal countries. After the revolution, the MNR rooted its legitimacy in expanded electoral procedures, unitary nationalism and a homogenizing notion of popular sovereignty. As Gotkowitz (2007) argues, the defining feature of its revolution was its democratizing impact, an expansion of democracy that was marked the “tension between support and restraint of indigenous political participation.” Bolivian classic populism increased polarization and downplayed political, social and ethnic plurality while significantly expanding democratic representation. The MNR combined a unitary notion of the people vs. the oligarchy with relative low levels of personalism. In this moderate populist sense, it resembled the Venezuelan case where also populists initially had an alliance with the military that soon implied a move to the left of the political spectrum. In its classic form, the MNR was initially a much more radical populist movement than Peronism, Velasquismo, Aprismo, Gaitanism and Varguism. This had a lot to do with its post-war rejection of fascist violence (transnational and national) as with the particularities of its revolutionary rise to power. But eventually, and in populist transformista fashion, Paz Estenssoro broke in the 1960s with the left of the party and clearly realigned himself with the American led Cold War and the Bolivian military (Gotkowitz, 2007, 287 and also 15, 164–166, 172–173, 289; Klein, 1982, 219–245; Zanatta, 2006, 76–84).

In Venezuela Acción Democrática (AD) adopted slogans such as “Venezuela first” and “to divide is to identify,” while AD was engaged in the coup of 1945. It then won presidential elections two years later obtaining 74% of the votes. As Peronism, Varguism and the Bolivian MNR, it also switched from participating in a dictatorship to become a populist democracy. Like Peronism and also Varguism, AD engaged in a wide program of social reform that rearticulated social relations, defined new political identifies, and enhanced popular representation and participation (Langue, 2009, 226–238). All in all, the Peronist way of adapting fascism to the Cold War democratic realities was also adopted in other Latin American countries. Even if the origins of other Latin American populisms were not fascist as it was the case with Peronism, there are elements of populism such as their political theology, the mythical idea of history and the ritual nature of their political spectacle and political religion that are related to fascism.

Rather than being the platonic form that shaped all others, Argentine populism was the actualization of a global concern, shared by global anti-communist thinkers and militants, including fascists, about the need to overcome liberal democracy and “real socialism.” Located far from the experiments of European fascists, and without being excessively touched by their resounding defeat, Argentina became a viable space in which transnational fascism, and more generally anti-communism, could rethink itself in a very different context.

**Fascists into Peronists**

Peronism was the first modern populist regime in history and it also presented spectacular historical bifurcations. These forking paths started with its stunning emergence as a Cold War reformulation of fascism—that is to say, a revolutionary rejection of fascist violence that emerged out of a military dictatorship led by Juan Perón but that created in 1946 the first post-war case of populist democracy—and then continued with the left-wing Peronist guerrillas and the right-wing Peronists of the 1960s and 1970s, the neoliberal stage of the Peronism of Carlos Menem, when Peronists joined the so-called Washington consensus in the 1990s and, finally, the last path, with the left populism of the Kirchners (2003–2015). Throughout its long history, Peronism has refused to engage in a search for programmatic

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closure. This was a central facet of its populist ideology. Peronism (as a movement, as a regime, and more so, as a way of doing and understanding politics) has the ability to be in a state of constant reformulation, so that some politicians leave the political game but Peronism remains, with the continuous refurbishing of its electoral machinery, perks and clientelistic relations with the electorate. This Peronist metamorphosis represents the fluctuating nature of populism in its constant search for absolute majorities and total allegiances to vertical forms of leaderships and, last but not least, in its ability to challenge not only liberalism but also popular forms of radical democracy. Peronism is not fascism, but fascism represents a key dimension of its origins (Spektorowski, 2003).

Fascist leaders wanted a dictatorship whose leader denied the electoral means to justify their power. Such was the case of Mussolini, Hitler in Germany and the fascists in Argentina, Japan and many other places. All of them participated in the experience of transnational fascism. But after 1945, the Argentine military officer Juan Perón, the leader of a military dictatorship in search of legitimacy, inverted the terms of the issue and, in fact, created the first form of modern populism. Unlike fascism, Perón embraced electoral democracy. As a practical leader of a dictatorship, Perón won the presidential elections to become a *bona fide* democratic leader. Peronism destroyed (or even self-destructed) the military dictatorship that had Perón as its de facto leader and built a new post-war way of understanding democracy.

Peronism was a new way of understanding democracy, which maintained the notion of popular sovereignty through the mathematics of elections and democratic forms of representation, but radically enhanced the figure of the leader, who was then fully presented as the best interpreter of the will of people. The followers were asked to have faith in the leaders’ intuitions and constant policy changes. They were, and they still are asked to trust that the leader has a will that both encompasses and surpasses their political understanding. In populism, the legitimacy of the leader is not only based in the former’s ability to represent the electorate but also on the belief that the leader’s will goes far beyond the mandate of political representation. This is because populists maintain that the leader has an innate and better knowledge than the people of what they really want. In Peronism, the populist leaders are the object of representation and the subject of popular delegation within the context of formal democratic procedures. The elected leaders act as the personification of popular sovereignty, exerting a great degree of autonomy vis-à-vis the majorities that have elected them.

Populism like fascism, liberalism, and communism is a political ideology that historically has tended to amplify in the short run political participation while at the same time minimizing it in the long run. In populism, as in other current manifestations of democracy such as neo-liberalism, meaningful political participation by citizens does not translate well from rhetoric to practice. In short, populism is a modern understanding of the political with unstable ideas about popular sovereignty, leadership and how a capitalist society should be organized and ruled. Populism presents a hybrid combination of the three. Rooted in a rethinking of fascism, and a clear rejection of its extreme violence, populism embraces the democratic principle of electoral representation but also fuses it with radical forms of vertical leadership. Modern populism, in its classical Peronist form, actively searches for social reform. It insists on creating forms of state capitalism and a new upper class attached to it through its links with the leader and movement that partly changed income inequality.

Classic populism represented the fascist combination of extreme nationalism and a non-Marxist reading of the socialist tradition that fascists like Benito Mussolini understood so well. But the populism of General Juan Perón was rooted in a complex ideological cradle that combined the legacies of fascism with those of its enemies: Perón maintained that “we are not
If there is something in communism that we can take, we take it, names don’t scare us. If fascism, anarchism, or communism have something good, we take it” (Perón cited in Buchrucker, 1982, 325).

Borrowing from the left and the right, Perón took the accusation of eclecticism as a compliment. This “eclecticism” that Perón shared with Mussolini distanced him from the Italian dictator in practical, and later, theoretical, terms. Fascism sustained itself in the ideal of violence and war as the sublime values of nationality and the leader’s persona. In military terms, it mobilized the masses but tended to demobilize them in social terms. Peronism inverted the terms of the fascist equation. In doing so, it distanced itself from the fascist models and became a *sui generis* political ideology. That Peronism reformulated fascism was a matter of foundational significance in the broader history of modern populism (Finchelstein, 2014, 90–91).

Peronism was the unexpected result for everyone, including its creator, of an attempt at a fascist reform of Argentine political life. Fascism was always the model Perón had looked to. But, as Tulio Halperín Donghi has suggested, “If the example of fascism couldn’t give concrete orientation to the Peronist movement, instead it contributed very effectively by disorienting it.” The fascist model tended to focus on objectives that did not coincide with the realities of Argentine and the global post-war Cold War or with the vertical and horizontal contradictions of the leadership and bases of the Peronist movement. While Argentina appeared to be ripe for fascism, the world showed itself to be too ripe for it (Halperín Donghi, 1995, 30, 35).

In the journey traveled by Peronist ideology and practice, from the messianic idea of fascist leadership to the profound transformations of unionized Peronism, from Perón’s inspiration in fascism to the worker’s movement, a dynamic interaction was created that narrowed the leader’s autonomy at the same time as it mobilized and transformed the logic of the followers.

Converging arguments can be made with other cases of classic populism, especially Varguismo and Gaitanismo. A similar logic would later be applied in the neoclassic populist movements where a context of crisis and political contestation opened the way for the affirmation of the populist persuasion.

In the case of Peronism, the structural reforms of the social base accomplished by Perón and the dictatorship of 1943–1946 were not initially accompanied by formal democracy. Thus, the followers could not formally express their support for the dictatorial regime and its leading figure. This could not have been done without delegitimizing the dictatorship. Perón resolved this contradiction by calling for elections to legitimize his leadership, up until then a dictatorship. Moreover, when he was removed from his dictatorial positions, during the famous popular demonstrations in his favor he was able to position himself as the leader of a popular coup against the dictatorship. He then won the presidential election in 1946. The result was a democracy that combined the expansion of social rights and increased electoral participation with the limitation of political rights.

This novel form of politics of the post-war later became the classic case of Latin American populism. As an authoritarian version of electoral democracy, populism represents itself as being outside ordinary politics. It presents non-electoral claims for democracy. Fewer spaces are left for political minorities to express themselves and they are presented as traitors to the “real” will of the nation or, worse, as mere puppets of foreign powers plotting against the country. Finally, populism conflates state and movement, enforcing forms of clientelism that feature the leader as the incarnation of the people. Indeed, Perón saw his leadership as the eternal link between the people of the nation as a whole and the security apparatus of the state. As he argued in an early third-person reference to himself in the famous speech of 17 October 1945:

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In this historical hour for the Republic, let Colonel Perón be the link of union that would make indestructible the brotherhood between the people, the army and the police. Let this union be eternal and infinite so this people will grow in that spiritual unity of the true and authentic forces of nationality and order.

(Perón, 1946, 186)

In contrast to classic fascism, which used democracy to destroy it from within and impose a dictatorship, Peronism originated in a military dictatorship but established a populist authoritarian democracy. Perón’s brand of populism was rooted in a view of secular liberal democracy as the source of communism. In Peronism, this authoritarian view of democracy constituted the need to legitimize, using the popular vote, the interwar synthesis of nationalism and non-Marxist nationalist socialism. In his memoirs, Perón clearly identified Italian fascism and Nazism with this “socialism with a national character.” Referring to his visit to fascist Italy, he stated:

I chose to do my military assignment in Italy because it was where a new national socialism was being tested. Until then, socialism had been Marxist. In contrast, in Italy, socialism was sui generis, Italian: fascism.

(Perón cited in Eloy Martínez, 2004, 2)

Perón radically reformulated fascism in a newly democratic anti-liberal key. But populism is neither Argentinean, Latin American, North American, Asian nor European. Instead, it is a global phenomenon with distinctive European, Asian, American and Latin American histories. It is, and was, the outcome of the interconnections and transfer of political ideas and historical experiences throughout the Atlantic and beyond.

Populism first emerged as an anti-leftist democratic solution and an attempt to overcome the Cold War dichotomy between liberalism and communism. By way of “democratizing” the non-democratic experiences of fascism, Peronism morphed into the first post-war example of a populist regime.

Conclusion

After its modern emergence as a reformulation of fascism, populism has presented a variety of contrasting histories. As Hans Vorländer argues, populism can act as “the good, the bad and the ugly.” It can have diverse and even contradicting effects on democracy. It can stimulate it, narrow it or even destroy it (Vorländer, 2011).

Peronism, like most post-war examples of Latin American populism, rejected not only dictatorial fascist forms but also high levels of political violence, racism and anti-Semitism, together with war and militarism. To be sure, Perón welcomed many Nazis and other fascists and Vargas also persecuted minorities in Brazil. But Perón also allowed Argentine Jews to be full members of the nation as long as they declared themselves Peronist Jews. Vargas’ campaigns against minorities resembled the contemporary illiberal trends of American democracy (for example Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s actions against Japanese Americans), rather than promulgating Nazi-fascist style racist laws. Populism implied a rejection of fascist ways. Peronism and other populisms polarized their societies, but did not engage in high levels of repression and political violence.

Similar authoritarian developments of democracy have pervaded the last two decades of Latin American populism; populism married vertical forms of democracy with vertical forms of leadership. For example, the case of Venezuela with Chávez often complicates ideal-typical pictures. His populist regime strengthened the army and popular militarism, occasionally
engaged in anti-Semitism and although Comandante Chávez first participated in a coup (as Perón had done in 1930 and 1943); he was later fully committed to democratic elections while limiting other democratic procedures. Thus, Latin American populism, left fascism behind, and actually embraced the authoritarian forms of democracy that defined it so well. It is unclear whether European or American forms of neoclassic right-wing populism are equally committed to formal democracy, as it has been generally the case of Latin American populism. Fascism is always looming above the past and present history of populism. This is especially the case in Europe and the United States. In sharp contrast with most Latin American versions of populism, which are firmly rooted in formal democracy, the new American and Euro-populism run the risk of returning the populist phenomenon to its pre-populist or even fascist origins. Unmaking the post-fascist reformulation of fascism, the most extreme American and European populisms are increasingly turning into neofascism.

Populism is the opposite of pluralism in politics. It talks in the name of an imagined majority and dismisses all views that it considers part of the minority. Especially on the right, its enemies often include actual religious and ethnic minorities and always involve the independent press. Perón spoke in the name of the people and imagined himself as the opposite of the elites. Like Le Pen, Wilders, Trump and many other contemporary leaders, the Argentine general set his own persona against politics as usual. He represented “anti-politics” and conceived his own role in messianic terms. He was tasked with radically changing Argentina, giving it a new historical foundation at a time of terminal crisis.

If Perón was the epitome of twentieth-century populism, the new right-wing strain represents populism’s new wave for the new century. This time, however, populism returns to some fascist themes that Perón and classic populism had rejected. Trumpismo—and its European counterparts such as France’s Marine Le Pen, the Italian Northern League or Germany’s AFD and Pegida—return to xenophobia in a way that the Latin American conductor would never have imagined.

References

Federico Finchelstein