Introduction

Thinking through Fascism and Populism
in Terms of the Past

Representing a historian’s inquiry into how and why fascism morphed into populism in history, this book describes the dictatorial genealogies of modern populism. It also stresses the significant differences between populism as a form of democracy and fascism as a form of dictatorship. It rethinks the conceptual and historical experiences of fascism and populism by assessing their elective ideological affinities and substantial political differences in history and theory. A historical approach means not subordinating lived experiences to models or ideal types but rather stressing how the actors saw themselves in contexts that were both national and transnational. It means stressing varied contingencies and manifold sources. History combines evidence with interpretation. Ideal types ignore chronology and the centrality of historical processes. Historical knowledge requires accounting for how the past is experienced and explained through narratives of continuities and change over time.

Against an idea of populism as an exclusively 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 to return populism to history. Distinctive, and even opposed, forms of left- and right-wing populism crisscross the world, and I agree with historians like Eric Hobsbawm that left and right forms of populism cannot be conflated simply because they are often antithetical.¹ While populists on the left present those who are opposed to their political views as enemies of the people, populists on the right connect this populist intolerance of alternative political views with a conception of the people formed on the basis of ethnicity and country of origin. In short, right-wing populists are xenophobic.

Emphasizing the populist style rather than its contents, most historians have rejected the most generic, transhistorical dimensions of the many theories of populism that minimize historical and ideological differences. By questioning definitions of populism as either exclusively left or right, I stress how populism has historically presented a range of possibilities, from Hugo Chávez to Donald Trump, maintaining essential social and political distinctions between left and right but without losing its key illiberal attributes in its varied historical manifestations. And against the commonplace idea of populism as a new political experience without a deep history—namely, a new formation that was born out of the turn-of-the-century fall of Communism—put forward a historical analysis of populism as equally rooted in the three other global moments of the past century: the two world wars and the Cold War.²

From the European right to the United States, populism, xenophobia, racism, narcissistic leaders, nationalism, and antipolitics occupy the center of politics. Should we brace ourselves for an ideological storm similar to the one fascism precipitated when it first appeared a little less than one hundred
years ago? Some actors and analysts of world politics believe so, and the recent surge of racist populist politics in the United States, Austria, France, Germany, and many other places around the globe seems to confirm it. But few agree on what fascism and populism actually are, and scholars of fascism and populism have often been reticent about entering the public discussion about the uses of the terms. By absenting themselves from public debates, they have left the uses of fascism and populism basically devoid of historical interpretation. Whereas fascism and populism seem to be all over the place, many current actors and interpreters are not aware of their actual histories.

THE USES OF FASCISM AND POPULISM

Fascism, like populism, is often used to denote absolute evil, bad government, authoritarian leadership, and racism. These uses of the terms take away their historical meanings. The problematic belief that history merely repeats itself has traveled the Global North and the Global South, from Moscow to Washington, and from Ankara to Caracas. After the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, and the connected Ukrainian crisis, Russian officials referred to the government in Ukraine as the outcome of a fascist coup. Hillary Clinton, secretary of state at the time, described Russian president Vladimir Putin’s actions with respect to Ukraine as something like “what Hitler did back in the ’30s.” Far from the Black Sea, the Venezuelan president, Nicolás Maduro, that same year used the threat of fascism to justify his imprisonment of an opposition leader. The same problematic claims were, and are, made by those opposed to Latin American experiments with populism. Similar epithets are commonly used for the Middle East and Africa. In 2017,
Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan described Europe as “fascist and cruel.” Almost identical characterizations of both government and opposition as fascist crisscross the Global South and North from Argentina to the United States, where Donald Trump faced this very serious accusation during his successful 2015–16 presidential campaign and where he himself as President-elect accused intelligence agencies of having engaged in Nazi practices against him. Trump symptomatically asked, “Are we living in Nazi Germany?”

Like the term *fascism*, the term *populism* has been abused equally as a condensation of extremes from right to left. It has been inflated or conflated with anything that stands against liberal democracy. For example, politicians like Mexican president Enrique Peña Nieto or the former British prime minister Tony Blair (notably, after the British “Brexit” of 2016) charged that populism was standing against the neoliberal status quo that they so passionately represented. In fact, this tendency to paint populism as an unproblematized negative take on democracy reveals a simplistic, and often self-serving, identification of democracy with neoliberalism. These positions replicate the us versus them totalizing views of populism. Moreover, these views void democracy of any emancipatory potential. In this context, when confronted with its neoliberal enemies, sectors of society (from right to left) that feel they have been left aside by technocratic elites find populism even more appealing. Populism and neoliberalism can be seen as equally undermining democratic diversity and equality, but neither is a form of fascism.

Populism and neoliberalism do not enable meaningful political decision making by citizens. Nonetheless, they are part of the democratic spectrum, and especially after 1989 they have been causally connected and have often succeeded each another.
On a global scale, populism is not a pathology of democracy but a political form that thrives in democracies that are particularly unequal, that is, in places where the income gap has increased and the legitimacy of democratic representation has decreased. As a response, populism is capable of undermining democracy even more without breaking it, and if and when it does extinguish democracy, it ceases to be populism and becomes something else: dictatorship.

Historically, the populist responses to these contexts (right or left) are distinctive and have been framed within varying national situations and political cultures, but they generally go in the direction of authoritarianism. This is mainly because populism, like fascism before it, understands its own position as the only and true form of political legitimacy. The single truth of populism is that the leader and the nation make up a whole. For populism, the singular will of the majority cannot accept other points of view. In this regard, populism is like fascism in being a response to liberal and socialist explanations of the political. And also like fascism, populism does not recognize a legitimate political place for an opposition that it regards as acting against the desires of the people and that it also accuses of being tyrannical, conspiratorial, and antidemocratic. But this refusal to recognize the opposition’s legitimacy does not generally go beyond the logic of discursive demonization. The opponents are turned into public enemies but only rhetorically. If populism moves from this rhetorical enmity to practices of enemy identification and persecution, we could be talking about its transformation into fascism or another form of dictatorial repression. This has happened in the past, for example, in the case of the Peronist Triple A during the beginning of Argentina’s Dirty War in the 1970s, and without question it could happen in the future. This morphing of populism back into
fascism is always a possibility, but it is very uncommon, and when it does happen, and populism becomes fully antidemocratic, it is no longer populism. While fascism celebrates dictatorship, populism never does so. Fascism idealizes and practices raw forms of political violence that populism rejects in theory and, most often, in practice. Talking about populism and fascism as though they are the same is thus problematic, as the two are significantly different. Populism is a form of authoritarian democracy, while fascism is an ultraviolent dictatorship. The terms are genealogically but usually not conceptually or contextually connected. Properly historicized, populism is not fascism.

Why then are populism and fascism used without reference to their histories? Are we really witnessing the return of fascism, the ism that marked the first half of the twentieth century with steel and blood? Generally, fascism is not approached as a specific historical experience that had very traumatic outcomes but is, rather, considered an insult. Thus, populist parties and leaders that generally represent authoritarian understandings of democracy, but ultimately are not against it, are wrongly equated with fascist dictatorial formations. After 1945, for the first time in its history, populism finally morphed from an ideology and a style of protest movements to a power regime. This was a turning point in its conceptual and practical itineraries, and the historical relevance of this turning point cannot be stressed enough. Likewise, fascism became truly influential only when it transitioned from ideology and movement to regime. In this sense, as the first populist leader in power, Perón played a role similar to the one enacted by the fascist leaders Mussolini and Hitler. When populism became a regime, it finally crystalized as a new and effective political form for ruling the nation. In doing so, populism reformulated fascism, and to that extent, as in the
famous case of Argentine Peronism, it became a fully differentiated ism: one that was, and is, rooted in electoral democracy at the same time that it displays a tendency to reject democratic diversity.

FASCISM RETURNS

_Fascism_ as a term has the uncanny ability to absorb any new event in a way that obscures its meaning and history. We are not far from the time when US president George W. Bush presented Al-Qaeda as an Islamo-fascist entity. Fascism is part of our political vocabulary, but has it really returned from its 1945 grave? Has it returned as populism? Significant differences exist between fascism as discursively invoked and its more bifurcated continuities in the present. As a regime, fascism never returned after the end of World War II, and in fact the absence of fascist regimes defined the second half of the last century. Liberalism and communism united to defeat the other ism of modern politics. Once they defeated fascism, they often fought and competed against each other, creating the Cold War. Modern populism as we know it today emerged in this new context. Many historians agree that the Cold War was in fact very hot in the Global South (from Vietnam and Indonesia to the Guatemalan genocide and the Argentine Dirty War), but it never reached the record global “hotness” levels of the fascist violence that led to the Holocaust and World War II. In any case, after 1945, most actors believed that fascism had been defeated for good. From then on, few antidemocratic politicians, from Juan Perón to Marine Le Pen and Donald Trump, associated themselves with terms such as _fascism_, but this does not mean they were fully disassociated from fascism in theory and practice. _Populism_ is the
key term for understanding the fascist soundings of events and political strategies that reformulated the legacies of fascism for new democratic times.

In the guise of postfascist forms of antiliberal democracy, fascism continued its legacy through various combinations of populism and neofascism. The truth is that, despite the predominance of populism, many neofascist groups remained and continue to exist. Actual neofascist movements that, unlike the populist ones, want to flatly invoke and replicate the fascist legacy are on the rise in Europe. Countries like Greece, with its extreme right-wing movement Golden Dawn, or Norway, where a solo, fascist mass killer, fed by transnational neofascist readings, slaughtered seventy-seven people in 2011, have provided these societies with measured doses of fascist political violence and death that exemplify what neofascism stands for. Sometimes neofascists are fellow travelers of populism. Populists differ from neofascists in their desire to reshape democracy in authoritarian fashion without fully destroying it, but like the neofascists, right-wing Euro-populists identify “the people” with an ethnically conceived national community. In Germany, the Alternative for Germany (AFD), and especially the Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the West (Pegida) Movement straddle right-wing populist authoritarianism and the neo-Nazi legacies of German fascism. These populists reduce democracy to the predominance of a majoritarian ethnic group and claim that this type of democracy is being attacked by outsiders. Similarly, populist movements in France and the Netherlands are partly rooted in a xenophobic reclamation of the fascist past, at the same time that they reject it. In Ukraine, the street protests of 2014 were crowded with Ukrainian radical rightists, but this does not mean that fascism is ruling Ukraine or that France or Germany are at
risk of witnessing a fascist resurgence. The same pattern goes for the European populism of the right and extreme right as a whole, as well as for North American populism.

TRUMPISM IN HISTORY

During the 2015–16 US presidential campaign, Donald Trump, and significant sectors of the American right, featured populist forms of racism, especially against Mexican immigrants, and discrimination against religious minorities as key parts of their programs. These forms of populism were also supported by neofascist groups like the Ku Klux Klan and others, but this does not mean that Trumpism was a form of fascism. As in Europe, neofascist fellow travelers supported what in fact was a constellation of right-wing populisms that defined the Trumpist campaign. As a result of the predominance of xenophobic moments in the campaign, including some cases of violence against critics and protesters, a new legitimacy for these views emerged. The extreme right-wing side of Trumpism at the white supremacist “alt-right” website, Breitbart, argued in its famous “A Manifesto for the 60 Percent: The Center-Right Populist-Nationalist Coalition” that the politics of populism stood between national salvation and a new civil war. Only a “strong and far-seeing leadership” could save America from a war from within. Electoral decisions were part of this populist formula, but they were linked to the idea of Trump as representing what the people wanted even before they voted. As the American populists argued, “That’s populism in a nutshell, taking the people's side against the power elites who clearly do not have our best interests at heart.” They claimed “populism” made “a resurgence in America and indeed in increasingly significant pockets across Europe because it puts our people
first, FIRST. That is why it is winning. That is why the elites hate it so much, and it’s ultimately the root of why they hate Donald Trump.” The former CEO of Breitbart Steve Bannon, who was also one of Trump’s closest advisors and the CEO of his campaign, especially stressed the populist nature of the rise of Trump in American history. His alt-right, white supremacist supporters stated that Trump belonged to the tradition of American populism, which they differentiated from fascism.6

From a historical perspective, Trump clearly sounded like a fascist, and he bridged the gap between what he represented—namely, a radical extremist populist candidacy—and what fascism has stood for. But he was still inscribed in the postwar authoritarian ways of populism rather than in “classical” fascist politics. Like many other populist leaders, from Juan Perón in Argentina to Silvio Berlusconi in Italy, Trump repeatedly stated that he acted in the name of the people, while he also pushed the limits of democracy. Even though he introduced himself as the “law and order” candidate, he questioned respect for the rule of law and the separation of powers. Trump was especially antidemocratic in his attempts to downplay the autonomy of the justice system. He used race as a political tool to attack the judiciary when he accused an American judge of acting against him because of that judge’s Mexican heritage. In the campaign, Paul Ryan, the Republican speaker of the house and the second most powerful Republican politician at the time, characterized Trump’s comments about the judge as “the textbook definition” of racism. In turn, Trump resorted to the populist playbook, declaring his candidacy was the unspoken expression of what “the people” wanted: “The people are tired of this political correctness when things are said that are totally fine.”7 Trump saw himself as the unrepressed voice of the people’s desires. In turn,
he saw his opponent, Hillary Clinton, “as running against all of the American people and all of the American voters.” Trump believed he represented the people of the entire country, and Clinton was antithetical to the American people and the nation. Fascist-sounding conspiratorial views abounded in Trump’s authoritarian message. He said that Clinton had met “in secret with international banks to plot the destruction of US sovereignty.” Having won his own party’s primaries, Trump understood that he had received a “mandate from the people,” which justified his antagonistic populist style, but he remained far from fascism’s dictatorial ways.

The ideas presented in the Trump campaign had clear fascist and racist undertones. As noted historian of fascism Robert Paxton argued, while there are significant differences between the interwar context that gave rise to fascism and the present day, “echoes of fascism” could be heard in Trump’s themes in 2015 and 2016, especially in the candidate’s concern for national regeneration and fear about decline, as well as in his “style and technique.” However, he concluded that Trump was not a fascist. Paxton referenced Trump’s xenophobic proposals, which clearly linked the candidate with Hitler and Mussolini, and identified Trump as a protofascist in the making. He represented “a sort of populist quasifascism” that had not yet developed into fascism. If Paxton as a historian used populism as a prefascist stage to historically analyze the fascist soundings of Trumpism, other interpreters of fascism and populism refused to view Trump through the lens of fascism. Stanley Payne, a famous conservative historian of fascism, stressed that Trump was not a fascist but a reactionary. Violence and nationalist revolutionary trends were absent in Trump, who was part of a “right-wing populist movement.” Similarly, for Roger Griffin, a renowned historian of fascist studies, “You can be
a total xenophobic racist male chauvinist bastard and still not be a fascist.” Griffin did not see in Trump the fascism that he identifies with his own theory of fascism: “There has to be a longing for a new order, a new nation, not just a reformed old nation.” For Griffin, Trump was not yet fascist: “As long as Trump does not advocate the abolition of America’s democratic institutions, and their replacement by some sort of post-liberal new order, he’s not technically a fascist.”

These scholars did not stress the historical links between fascism and populism. Mostly absorbed with the West, neither significantly considered the transnational dimensions of these phenomena. In other words, their Euro—North American approach to fascism and populism did not meaningfully place Trump in a global context beyond the United States and Europe. At best, global examples acted as mere additions to what was and is for them basically a North Atlantic story. What sounded like echoes of the past were part of the historical explanation of the present. In contrast with these arguments, I would argue that fascism and populism, while linked in history, belong to different contexts and became very different historical global experiences. Fascism and populism are different chapters in the same transnational history of illiberal resistance to modern constitutional democracy. Trumpism is part of that history. From fascism to populism, many things changed in the world, including the fact that fascist regimes were left behind in the dividing waters represented by the allied victories in 1945 and the subsequent Cold War between them. Fascist regimes were part of the past, but populist regimes thrived after the defeat of fascism. While there are important links between fascism and populism, one historical experience cannot be subsumed under the other. Hitler and Mussolini were indeed different from Perón and
Trump, but historically meaningful connections exist between Peronism, or American populism, and fascism.

All in all, most of these populist movements and persons distanced themselves from classical fascism, but they nonetheless were often labeled as such. Most historians, myself included, are allergic to these generalizations. These public uses of fascism and populism need to be confronted, not simply denied or ridiculed. Presently, pundits and politicians use fascism to loosely describe not only populism but also authoritarian regimes, international terrorism, or repressive stances by the state, or even street protests by the opposition. This laxity is historically problematic, as such careless uses of fascism demonize populism but don’t account for its historical causes. The conflation of fascism and populism often leads to proffering the status quo as the only alternative to populist choices.

In Latin America, for example, these ahistorical uses of populism and fascism often conflate populist leaders (either in the government or the opposition) who aggressively used mass politics with the dictatorial leaders who used criminal means to suppress them. They collapse essential distinctions between the populism of the left and the right, when in fact populism can be distinctively leftist or rightist or an amalgamation of both. They also conflate democratically elected regimes or democratically engaged citizens with military dictatorships that destroy democracy. In conceptual terms, the use of the adjectives fascist and populist is a serious problem. In light of the way the terms fascism and populism have been used and abused, the time has come to place both in their historical contexts. Only then can we assess the movements and situations presently taking place in Latin America, Europe, Africa, the United States, and elsewhere. The present cannot be understood in isolation from its
many genealogies, and fascism and racism are clearly among them. Fascism is not only a blurry ghost from the past but also a once-defeated historical ideology that has clear populist and neofascist repercussions today.

Overall, this book provides a contextual reading of primary sources, historiography, and political theory that is highly attentive to how and why fascism often turned into populism. It offers a historical critique of the pathways from fascist to populist ideologies, movements, and regimes. Moving away from the public uses of the terms, this book studies how and why fascism and populism emerged in history.

FASCISM AND POPULISM IN HISTORY

After Mussolini and the Italian fascists adopted fascism as the name for their antidemocratic revolution, and especially when fascism became a power regime in 1922, the word *fascism* became a global marker of a renewed anti-Enlightenment, antidemocratic tradition. Going beyond national contexts and restricted Eurocentric theories, I put forward a historical understanding of fascism as a traveling political universe, a radical nationalism affected and, to some extent, constituted by transnational patterns.12

In history, fascism was a political ideology that encompassed totalitarianism, state terrorism, imperialism, racism, and, in Germany’s case, the most radical genocide of the last century: the Holocaust. Fascism in its many forms did not hesitate to kill its own citizens, as well as its colonial subjects, in its search for ideological and political domination. Millions of civilians perished across the world during the apogee of fascist ideologies in Europe and beyond.
In historical terms, fascism can be defined as a global ideology with national movements and regimes. Fascism was a transnational phenomenon both inside and outside Europe. A modern counter-revolutionary formation, it was ultranationalist, antiliberal, and anti-Marxist. Fascism, in short, was not a mere reactionary position. Its primary aim was to destroy democracy from within in order to create a modern dictatorship from above. It was the product of an economic crisis of capitalism and a concurrent crisis of democratic representation. Transnational fascists proposed a totalitarian state in which plurality and civil society would be silenced, and there would increasingly be no distinctions between the public and the private, and between the state and its citizens. In fascist regimes, the independent press was shut down and the rule of law was entirely destroyed. Fascism defended a divine, messianic, and charismatic form of leadership that conceived of the leader as organically linked to the people and the nation. It considered popular sovereignty to be fully delegated to the dictator, who acted in the name of the community of the people and knew better than they what they truly wanted. Fascists replaced history and empirically based notions of truth with political myth. They had an extreme conception of the enemy, regarding it as an existential threat to the nation and to its people that had to be first persecuted and then deported or eliminated. It aimed to create a new and epochal world order through an incremental continuum of extreme political violence and war.¹³

In my own work, I propose analyzing fascism as a transnational ideology with important national variations. A global ideology, fascism constantly reformulated itself in different national contexts and underwent constant national permutations.