

From Fascism to Populism in History

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From Fascism to Populism in History. By Federico Finchelstein (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017), pp.352, AU\$59.99 (cloth), available in Australia through Footprint Books.

From Fascism to Populism in History arrives in the midst of an apparent “new wave” of right-wing populism across Europe and the United States. “New” at least through the eyes of many pundits and journalists, which have treated recent electoral victories by populist parties in places like Italy as shocking or inexplicable, despite populism having flourished in that country for several decades. Finchelstein contributes with his book to the clarification of the phenomenon from a historical perspective, stressing the need to look back in order to realise that it should not be shocking and that it can be explained, considering populism has never really gone away since 1945. It is a great contribution to the study of populism, in a field which has been traditionally dominated by political scientists’ analyses.

Finchelstein argues against dominant American and Eurocentric views, proposing a view from the South to study Fascism and populism, claiming that populism is not European, American or Argentine, but a global phenomenon with distinctive histories in each region and country. The book is divided into three chapters. In the first chapter, Finchelstein addresses the origin, concept and influence of Fascism, making a clear distinction between the latter and populism.

Although different, the author makes a provoking connection between them suggesting that they are both chapters of the same history, and that populism is an authoritarian form of democracy. He suggests that both share affinities regarding “the people”, “the nation”, the leaders and their enemies, and opens the second chapter, which focuses on populism in history, stating that populism is a reformulation of Fascism, a new political phenomenon for a new era in history. Like the fascist regimes before them, populist regimes acted and decided in the name of the people, but after 1945 they did it through democratic means.

However, there are significant differences as well. For instance, while Fascism was against electoral representation, populism channelled elections with authoritarian terms, undermining but not destroying democracy as the former did. The second chapter develops an interesting and thorough description and explanation of the origins and characteristics of populism. It then proposes several phases of modern populism post-1945, dividing them between Classical populism (i.e. Peronism in Argentina), Neoliberal populism (i.e. Silvio

Berlusconi in Italy), Neoclassical populism of the left (i.e. Kirchner administrations in Argentina, or Podemos in Spain), and Neoclassical populism of the right and extreme right (i.e. UKIP in England, or National Front in France).

The third chapter closes the book addressing the connection between Fascism and populism, discussing populism's tension between democracy and dictatorship. Overall, it is a very timely work that thoroughly discusses the current phase of populism around the world looking to the past for answers. It is especially useful to study some of the most recent cases in the region like the presidential candidates José Antonio Kast in Chile or Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil. Moreover, it includes an extensive analysis of the United States and Trump's populism, even suggesting that the latter could be considered as the "American Perón", one of the many provoking claims of the book.

It is an ambitious book that covers many topics (from Fascism and dictatorship, to Islamic and Macho populism), and that may have overestimated the impact and influence of the Argentinean case of Juan Domingo Perón in other parts of the world. Country experts would be able to answer this question, but considering the particularity of Perón's case, how generalisable is it? Is it transferable to other countries and regions?

With a strong support from his historical approach, Finchelstein backs each claim and effectively connects every idea into one very interesting and compelling piece.