FT Books Essay **Life & Arts**

Fascism revisited? A warning about the rise of populism

Today's angry political climate compels us to re-examine the meaning of democracy

Supporters of the Greek ultra-nationalist party Golden Dawn at a rally in Athens in February © Getty

Mark Mazower APRIL 11 2018

Days after Donald Trump was elected US president in November 2016, the dictionary publisher Merriam-Webster appealed to followers of its Twitter feed: unless they moved fast, the most popular word of the year was going to be "fascism". It was eventually toppled, but many of Merriam-Webster's readers evidently felt the topic to be of more than purely historical interest. I expect they still do. Viktor Orban's victory in the Hungarian elections last Sunday is just the latest event to ensure that fascination with the subject of authoritarian strongmen will linger on both sides of the Atlantic.

Historians have been trying to define fascism since the end of the second world war — without much success. It does not help that ideologically it was a composite of left and right, nor that it valued action over words, never pinning itself to a given text or doctrine. And there are almost too many fascists: between the first and second world wars, the right swept the board across much of Europe and South America, and the resulting panoply of examples make generalisation hard. To be a fascist meant wearing a brown shirt in Germany, a black one in Italy, green in Romania, blue in Spain, grey in South Africa and gold in Mexico. (It is hard to resist mention of the immortal Roderick Spode in PG Wodehouse's 1938 *The Code of the Woosters* who features as leader of the much-feared Black Shorts.) Of course, the differences ran deeper than fashion — attitudes to capitalism, and to religion, could diverge sharply.

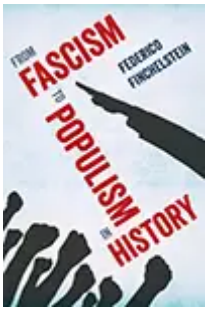
Yet there were also common denominators: a mass party, a love of violence and uniforms and contempt for parliamentary institutions, and a movement led invariably by a strong man claiming to speak in the voice of a unified nation in the war against its enemies. Fascism was always xenophobic, and generally racist and anti-Semitic.

The historiography rests on three basic assumptions, all of which are usefully questioned in Federico Finchelstein's *From Fascism to Populism in History*. One is that fascism not only originated in Europe but was primarily a European phenomenon. Another is that it was historically specific to those interwar years. The third: that fascism involved a repudiation of democracy, a kind of pathology of political development. An expert on the modern history of Argentina, Finchelstein reminds us that the second world war marked a turning point. Before it, fascists were filled with confidence: they wrote off democracy as an outmoded relic of the 19th century, and claimed fascism as the future.

Adolf Hitler, received by Italy's Benito Mussolini at the railway station in Florence on October 1 1940 © Getty Images

After Nazism's crushing defeat, this was impossible to argue. Once its atrocities became widely known, the term itself became taboo. In cold war South America, the US was prepared to defend nasty authoritarian regimes, but it was uncomfortable defending avowed fascists. The stigma remains today, a barrier for many extremist movements: the website of the far-right Greek party Golden Dawn, for instance, hotly denies that the party is either fascist or Nazi.

One conclusion to draw from this is that if fascism were to reappear today, it would be under a different guise. Finchelstein suggests that the heir to fascism was populism — a form of demagogic authoritarian politics that pays lip-service to electoral politics. But populism is a notoriously vague term and Finchelstein deploys it to cover not only Juan Perón in Argentina but also such disparate cases as the far-left Syriza party in Greece and Trump. That's a very mixed bag. What they have in common is the desire to recast politics as an anti-elite struggle. But that is about it.



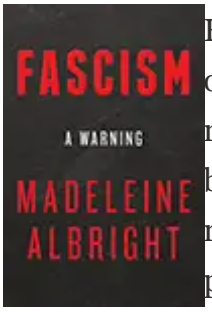
For Rob Riemen, a Dutch cultural philosopher, the term populism should be scrapped — fascism is fascism, then and now. *To Fight Against this Age* is a polemic written originally in response to the rise of Geert Wilders, leader of the Dutch far-right PVV party, and a warning of a possible return of fascism to Europe. As Riemen sees it, its roots lie in the conditions of modern life, in a society that stifles nobility of spirit, that defines its goal as the satisfaction of base material desires, and trusts to science and technology to find the solutions. Credulous masses of voters create the conditions in which charismatic demagogues arise. They do so in an age which — he says — is marked by the politics of the "mass man" and "organised stupidity".

But the supposed lowering of cultural and ethical standards cannot alone explain today's rise of the far-right. Fascism involves more than just demagogy and mass stupidity: more Tolstoy will not save us. However *To Fight Against this Age* does serve to remind us that populism and fascism are not the only slippery terms: there is "democracy" itself. As he denounces fascism, Riemen compares liberal democracy [good] with "mass democracies deprived of the spirit of democracy" [bad]. If this seems confusing, think back to 1920s Germany where the conservative author of *Das Dritte Reich*, Arthur Moeller van den Bruck, unfavourably contrasted "parliamentary democracy" which he loathed, with "real democracy". Hitler regarded "the parliamentary principle" as "one of the most serious symptoms of mankind's decay" yet insisted he was no dictator, but the leader of a more genuine democracy, one in which he served the *Volk*.

Dylan Riley, in the most systematically argued of the books reviewed here, responds to the conceptual challenge posed by such formulations. He says there are two basic ways to think about democracy. One is as a set of procedures and institutions: separation of powers, free elections and media, and so on. Another is as a principle of legitimacy. From this latter angle, Riley makes a powerful if unconventional argument that interwar fascism represented an advance of democracy rather than its curtailment. In countries such as Italy, Romania and Spain, liberal politicians in the 19th century had helped forge parliamentary institutions. But a much larger associational trend in society, based around peasant co-operatives, unions and mutual aid societies politicised groups marginalised from the electoral process. Fascists successfully mobilised these groups and brought them into national politics, thereby forging new authoritarian democracies while doing away with elections altogether.

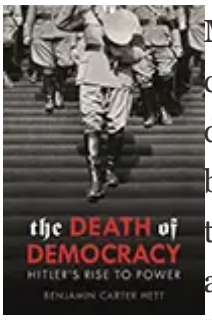
In *The Civic Foundations of Fascism in Europe*, Riley has in his sights the numerous political theorists who flourished at the end of the cold war, arguing that propagating "civil society" organisations was a way to spread democracy. Thanks to Facebook, we hardly now need reminding that banding together can happen for many purposes, some of them illiberal, ardently nationalistic, racist and xenophobic. Thus civil society is no panacea for authoritarianism; indeed Riley's argument is that in certain circumstances it may lead to it.

Likewise, liberal democracy is not always the cure; in the past it was itself the problem. In the 1920s, it was not only fascists who assailed liberals for the way they confined their conception of the political to constitutions and rights; social democrats also warned that democracy had to take account of people's economic needs and social suffering if it was not to suffer the crisis of legitimacy that Riley analyses. In our own era of austerity politics, amid the growth of the far-right in Europe, that seems a useful reminder from the past.



Historical sociology of a high calibre, Riley's work manifests the virtues of this now neglected genre. It may be short on narrative drama, but it reminds the reader that fascism did not triumph, *pace* Riemen, just because people are stupid and easily duped by dictatorial charisma. Its rise after 1918 reflected deep and longstanding social and political problems.

Benjamin Carter Hett's *The Death of Democracy* rehearses the now familiar tale of the collapse of the Weimar Republic through a fast-paced narrative enlivened by vignette and character sketches. While Hett does not much address the underlying structural issues that faced Weimar, it is intelligently written and brings out two points that supplement some of Riley's findings. One is the critical importance of the experience of the first world war and the prevalence of paramilitary violence. Riley's account is a little bloodless: fascists somehow became hegemonic where liberal elites failed. Hett reminds us that violence was at their core. But he also insists that Hitler did not prevail because Weimar was doing badly. On the contrary, it was doing remarkably well in tough conditions: the end came because conservative elites thought they could use the Nazis for their own purposes and realised their mistake too late.



Madeleine Albright's *Fascism: A Warning* is a mix of history, political commentary and memoir. Born in Prague the year before 1938's dismemberment of Czechoslovakia, the former US secretary of state blends always interesting personal reminiscence with a historical survey that sweeps from interwar fascism to the Bosnian war, Hugo Chávez and the rightwing dictators of today. Albright writes of the National Democratic Institute, a non-profit organisation that she founded, which advises countries how to modernise a legislature, professionalise political parties and create a space for civil society — precisely the kind of approach that Riley's book is designed to refute. Worried that democracy is on the retreat, alarmed that the 2017 Democratic index classified the US for the first time as a "flawed democracy", Albright is more comfortable stressing the problems of dictatorship than she is examining the reasons for discontent. Alert to Trump's fondness for strong men and critical of his willingness to cede leadership in the international arena, she hardly dwells on the institutional problems that beset the US today. Modernise a legislature? Professionalise political parties? Home would be a good place to start.

Argentine dictator Juan Perón, watched by his wife 'Evita', speaking in Buenos Aires in 1951 © Popperfoto/Getty Images

In fact if there is one good thing to come out of the current political uncertainty, it is that complacency about American democracy will be harder to sustain in future. Let us not worry overly about how to define a fascist: there are plenty of other nasty kinds of authoritarian regimes. It is the crisis of democracy that should concern us more. We know by now what can happen when the institutions of representative government become bitterly polarised, when large swathes of the electorate lose the capacity to compromise, when power and wealth pile up in the hands of elites and when those in charge of the state give up the challenge of responding to widespread economic hardship. History is not a one-way street and democracy has turned authoritarian before. Can it happen again? Why not?

From Fascism to Populism in History, by Federico Finchelstein, *University of California, RRP£24.95, 332 pages*

To Fight against This Age: On Fascism and Humanism, by Rob Riemen, *Norton, RRP£14.99, 176 pages*

The Civic Foundations of Fascism in Europe: Italy, Spain, and Romania, 1870-1945, by Dylan Riley, *Verso, RRP£16.99, 288 pages*

The Death of Democracy: Hitler's Rise to Power, by Benjamin Carter Hett, *William Heineman, RRP£20, 304 pages*

Fascism: A Warning, by Madeleine Albright, *William Collins, RRP£16.99, 304 pages*

Mark Mazower is a professor of history at Columbia University and author of 'What You Did Not Tell: A Russian Past and the Journey Home'

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