

New Politics of Playing with Fire. Current Challenges and Accents of Populism and Fascism. Review: De la Torre, Carlos (2025). *Populism and Fascism*. Published in: *Elements in the History and Politics of Fascism*, edited by Federico Finchelstein and António Costa Pinto. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 68 pp. \$ 22.00 (paper)

Populism and Fascism are not just yet another two abstract words in current use today, that have escaped from the ivory tower of the academic vocabulary to our day-by-day reality and conversation. They are the main sources of some representative current realities – debatable or even disputed, controversy or socially and politically aligned. In a sentence, they seem to activate extreme feelings, extreme attitudes and behaviours or, at least, borderline political actions and manifestations, followed by their respective social reactions. The idea of this volume is specifically addressing this confusing sensation of *déjà vu* in history and politics, and invites to a comparative deconstruction of the two concepts. Still, there is no general or academic consensus on the line that separates the two notions, other than history, geography and confusion. The latter is basically induced by the way fascist and populist actions assault democracy. From this point, a lot of questions arise and need to be readdressed. Among them are the ones listed below, translating nowadays extreme feelings and orientations:

“Are we experiencing the return of fascism? How best to characterize these leaders, their movements, and their enablers? Is a leader enough for fascism? Or are a party and movements in the streets needed to properly describe them as fascist? [...]. Are we willing to give up on a democracy that is built on pluralism, that defends the rights of people to hold different beliefs, and in which dialogue is the tool used to convince rivals of one’s arguments? Will notions of the heterosexual and patriarchal family replace the rights of citizens to choose their sexuality, and women’s reproductive rights? Will nativism and xenophobia trump efforts to build multiethnic democracies?” (p. 1)

Starting from this series of seven “academic” and “profoundly normative” interrogations (p. 1), the essay of Carlos de la Torre (2025) is juxtaposing populism and fascism with the aim of capturing their most recent effects on democracy, in order to extrapolate on potential effects for the future. The paper is more precisely



focusing on the differences that separate the two orientations, and promises to embrace a style adapted to academia and general audience as well. As a matter of fact, the question mark is a commonplace in this volume, which tries to elaborate on potential developments of such political actions nowadays. No less than 43 questions are formulated and addressed within the 59 pages of this volume. As a result, the extrapolative and predictive aim of the book is mostly revealed via complex series of new questions that arise from comparing historical outcomes of fascist or populist leaders, parties and movements to the most recent and somehow comparable political actions and manifestations. For instance, the two omnipresent political leaders of the book, recently on power¹, are Donald Trump (USA) and Jair Bolsonaro (Brazil), and they are even more referred to than Hitler or Mussolini. The argument of the author is that their (first) respective elections brought back “fascism” into “civic and academic debates” (p. 43). De la Torre notices that this tendency of recovering fascism as a core-concept in social sciences nowadays is even more pronounced since they both lost elections (Trump in 2021, and Bolsonaro in 2022), and decided to contest their respective results via undemocratic means. As such, their political surprising actions and orientations are explained in the light of historical political similarities with the two investigated concepts. The author is considering the main potential outcomes of such actions – that is, the erosion of democracy (meaning “democratic decline”) or even the collapse of democracy (meaning “regime change”).

As a matter of fact, this volume is the first of a series of already six *Elements in the History and Politics of Fascism*, edited by Federico Finchelstein (The New School for Social Research) and António Costa Pinto (University of Lisbon), at Cambridge University Press, and focusing on fascism as ideology, movement, and regime². The scope of this first *Element* is complex and very ambitious. The essay is short and dense, which makes it sometimes difficult to follow, especially from the perspective of the “general audience”³. The promise to cover the interests of both academic and general publics is, at this level, the main limitation of the book. And this because it simplifies too much for the academia, especially when addressing some concepts while excluding others. For instance, the central concept of “political community” is only used once (p. 13), and the occurrence seems accidental, while the notions of “people” and “political leader” are largely covered. The author’s choice is legitimate, as regards the two last concepts, given that they are considered constitutive for the similarities between populism and fascism. It also supports the general approach of the book that is, as put in the Abstract, “fascism and populism are similar insofar as they construct the

¹ The volume was published in January 2025.

² For a more detailed description, see *Elements in the History and Politics of Fascism* (last accessed on January 28, 2026).

³ This is the ambition of this *Element* only, while the series addresses specifically to the academia.

people as one, understand leadership as embodiment, and perform politics of the extraordinary”. By following the way that the author choses to build his argument, I will try to capture first the main strenghts of the book, and eventually the missing variables to be further evoked.

De la Torre states from the very beginning that some existing theoretical and empirical elaborations on the equivalence of fascism and populism are not correct. He argues that the main difference between populism and fascism stays in the way they relate to democracy: interwar fascism has abolished democracy, by replacing it with dictatorship; while populism was always favoured by the crisis of democracies, was built on undermining democracy “from within”, and the result was every time the erosion of democracy during this debatable cohabitation. As a result, the author is considering the two concepts both in their abstract academic dimension, and in their general understanding as common notions of the political conflict. At this level, the positioning of the author is innovative and a potential way to explain those differences for the general public. Still, some other significant relationships are missing from the picture or sometimes addressed in a very evasive way. This is the case, for instance, of the relationship of fascism and populism with identity.

The general premise, as revealed in Conclusions, is “the need for an accurate analysis of the past in order to speculate about the future” (p. 53). The large historical picture to be interrogated in relation to the most recent political developments is the “socioeconomic and political transformations that led to the emergence and normalization of the radical right in Europe and the Americas in the twenty-first century.” (p. 4). This explains why different scholar definitions – simplified or complex – of the two notions are discussed, pointing out on the lack of academic consensus at the level of clarifying and operational definitions. As a general rule, the considered basic principles in separating the two concepts are “their class base and emergence at distinct periods of modernization”, as well as their (still) general contemporary labelling as “insults” (p. 11). From a historical point of view, for De la Torre, only fascism is confined to a particular historical period, contrary to populism which has already conquered large geographies of the world at different times. This explains why similar manifestations of post-interwar interval are to be considered as “postfascism” (see p. 43) or “radical right populism” (p. 44), expressing the ideology of the so-called “wannabe fascists”. The term is borrowed from Federico Finchelstein (2024), as used in his recent volume *The Wannabe Fascists: A Guide to Understanding the Greatest Threat to Democracy* (Berkeley: University of California Press). De la Torre considers this denomination as synonymous to “right-wing populist extremists”, or “postfascists”, operating “in the democratic game while undermining the democratic legitimacy of procedures and institutions” (p. 55). The concept, as De la Torre argues, has a crucial advantage that is, “to not allow for the normalization of antidemocratic extremists, and to remind citizens that new and different forms of fascism could arise” (p. 59).

One of the main differences between fascism and postfascism, as emphasized in this book, is that nowadays “cultural forms of racism” (specific to postfascism) are substituted to “biological racism” (specific to fascism), where culture is to be understood as “rooted in the territory, language, and religion of an ethnic group” (p. 44). Second, some recent orientations in Europe link morality to gender ideology (such in Spain or Italy) or to laicity as state base (such in France). Still, what remains similar for fascism and postfascist ideology is the constant construction of the “total other” that is, the transfiguration of the traditional “enemy” into some contemporary elaborations. Among those last, even the qualifications of political rivals as “enemies of the leader and the people” (p. 49) are considered. As a result, postfascist ideologies also build upon polarization and antagonistic confrontation.

Moreover, from an ideological point of view, contrarily to fascism (also called “historical fascism” or “classical fascism”, see p. 9), populism could embrace a right orientation, “when the people are built as an ethnos”, or a left orientation, “when they are constructed as the plebs” (p. 10). Still, the main ideological gap that separates fascism from populism is that fascism was committed against parliamentary democracy, while populist ideology promises to fight for improving it (p. 49), while also participating in it. Nevertheless, the main innovative point of the essay remains the one of exploring both fascism and populism as “possible outcomes of processes of democratization” (p. 46), and not as factors extrinsic to democracy (here evoked as invading “external viruses”). In this line, the volume also elaborates on historical fascism and current populisms (plural) as mirror phenomena. While fascism is interpreted as the “death of democracy” (under Hitler and Mussolini), contemporary populisms could lead to the “slow death of democracy”. At this point of the argumentation, another concept is introduced – “democracies in crisis” – interpreted as a *sine qua non* condition for populisms to get to power and develop populist hybrid regimes *in lieu* of democracies. Within this new type of political regimes, elections, the respect of human rights and the rule of law – as formal democratic rules – coexist with social and political forms of exclusion. This statement leads to an ambivalent, but firm conclusion: “Hybrid regimes either democratize or become fully authoritarian” (p. 5). Still, the author further exemplifies different “temptations” such as radicalization, military coup, or competitive authoritarianism, that could rather favour the slow death of democracies, even if the different envisioned scenarios are not inevitably designed to leading at this unwilling result. In addition, De la Torre emphasises another three aspects constitutive for a pessimistic scenario: “elites’ normalization of the radical right (often of fascist origins), the global diffusion of right-wing extremist populism, and the realization that, even when leaders like Trump or Bolsonaro failed as presidents, they continue to have mass bases of supporters who idolize them as redeemers” (p. 56). They remain constitutive variables with unquantifiable potential for the death of democracies in the future. Nevertheless,

another potential scenario briefly covered within this book is the one addressing the positive impact of supranational institutions on “radical populist promises”, such as the case of Alexis Tsipras and his party Syriza in Greece. De la Torre concludes that, under the “pressure” of supranational demands of the International Monetary Fund, the European Central Bank and the Council of Europe, even if he was on power, Tsipras has “capitulated” and his promises “evaporated”. De la Torre emphasises that those supranational organisations were not able to “control” the leader or his populist party. Still, Syriza has eventually transformed into “a party of the establishment”, confirming the positive impact of supranational institutions on restraining populists (pp. 51–52).

De la Torre concludes that “we are experiencing a global reemergence of the radical right with fascist members who are learning from each other, sharing publications, and meeting regularly both formally and informally”. This phrase is a general description of the current global political reality, where right-wing leaders, movements and parties are basically exposing a general political program developed around their will “to play with fire again” (p. 59). The recent and current examples presented here, mostly from the US, Latin America and Europe are sound enough to validate this understanding. The author points out the responsibility of the citizens of “enabling and normalizing radical right populists”, when starting from the hazardous assumption that they could temper down and domesticate extreme anti-democrats.

Valentina Pricopie

Romain Descendre & Jean-Claude Zancarini, *L'œuvre-vie d'Antonio Gramsci*, Paris, La Découverte, 2023

Acest volum vine să completeze un corpus de cunoștințe aflat într-o continuă expansiune, consacrat operei și traiectoriei intelectuale a lui Antonio Gramsci. El constituie o contribuție deosebit de oportună într-un context în care gânditorul italian este folosit de ani buni de curente politice situate pe întreg spectrul ideologic, de la dreapta radicală până la stânga revoluționară, fapt ce tinde să distorsioneze și să simplifice semnificația profundă a reflecției sale teoretice. Perspectiva adoptată de autori este una originală, care articulează biografia fostului lider comunist cu producțiile sale filozofice și cu contextul istoric mai larg, înțeles ca o concatenare de dimensiuni afective, sociale, politice și culturale. Această opțiune metodologică reia, de altfel, programul intelectual schițat chiar de Gramsci, iar arhitectura volumului reflectă în mod fidel această orientare. Prima parte este consacrată formării jurnalistului și militantului politic, de la sosirea sa la Torino până la sfârșitul Primului Război Mondial. Cititorul descoperă un Gramsci profund interesat de lingvistică și angajat într-un dialog critic cu reprezentanții de seamă ai

idealismului italian, precum Benedetto Croce și Giovanni Gentile. Tot în această perioadă, își începe colaborarea cu diverse publicații și fondează ulterior revista *L'Ordine Nuovo*. A doua parte examinează perioada postbelică, marcată de grevele din uzinele Piemontului, de confruntarea cu reacția fascistă și de tentativa construirii unei mișcări politice de amploare. Cea de-a treia parte este consacrată anilor de detenție și elaborării programului său intelectual, în condiții deosebit de dificile. Pentru realizarea acestui demers, autorii mobilizează un material documentar de o remarcabilă exhaustivitate: de la corespondență și mărturii ale apropiaților până la scrierile culturale și filozofice ale lui Gramsci, valorificând atât textele deja consacrate, cât și edițiile publicate recent. Pe parcursul lecturii, cititorul este invitat să pătrundă succesiv în istoria politică a Italiei prefasciste, în dezbaterile dintre militanții comuniști privind strategiile de urmat, dar și în universul relațiilor personale și afective ale lui Gramsci. Această ambiție de a integra niveluri heterogene de analiză într-o perspectivă unificatoare explică atât amploarea, cât și bogăția lucrării. O asemenea abordare, pentru a relua trilogia formulată de Maurice Godelier, are meritul de a evidenția faptul că „eul cognitiv” nu se constituie independent de „eul social” și de „eul intim”. Astfel devin vizibile conexiuni care puteau fi intuite, dar care erau dificil de înțeles în mod riguros. Un exemplu este edificator în acest sens. În prima etapă a dezvoltării sale intelectuale, Antonio Gramsci insistă asupra necesității ca masele să își aproprieze cultura în sens larg, pentru a putea participa efectiv la conducerea societății și pentru a preveni emergența tendințelor autoritare. De altfel, viitorul secretar general al Partidului Comunist nu respinge cultura burgheză; dimpotrivă, susține că proletarii trebuie să aibă acces la aceasta și să beneficieze de resursele ei formative. Aceste dezbateri filozofice pot fi puse în relație și cu dialogurile pe care Gramsci le întreține cu muncitorii în timpul grevelor din anii 1919–1920, context în care apare ceea ce s-a numit „soviete în variantă italiană”. Aceste dimensiuni ale experienței sale contribuie la o înțelegere mai profundă a conceptului de „intelectual organic”, figură centrală a construcției sale teoretice și practice: un intelectual atașat menținerii unei „culturi înalte”, dar capabil să mențină o relație permanentă între universul proletar și elaborarea proiectelor politice. Autorii depun un efort susținut pentru a reînscris fiecare producție conceptuală într-o rețea de relații sociopolitice și afective, urmărind să evidențieze conexiunile dintre diferitele niveluri și momente ale existenței lui Gramsci. Această metodă le permite să formuleze ipoteze deosebit de fertile. Ei susțin, de pildă, că elementele fundamentale ale gândirii gramsciene, dezvoltate în perioada detenției, sunt strâns legate de schimbarea strategică survenită în cadrul Celui de-Al IV-lea Congres al Internaționalei Comuniste din iulie 1928. Strategia „frontului unic”, bazată pe alianțe inclusiv cu partidele social-democrate, este abandonată în favoarea orientării „clasă împotriva clasei”. Gramsci respinge această schimbare și încearcă să reformuleze problema în termeni diferiți. În acest context se înscrie reflecția sa asupra unor concepte precum „războiul de poziție” și „hegemonia”. Aceste exemple ilustrează relevanța perspectivei adoptate de autori

și bogăția contribuțiilor pe care aceasta le oferă, contribuții imposibil de rezumat în câteva rânduri. Demersul, analiza diacronică și sinteza realizate de Romain Descendre și Jean-Claude Zancarini permit o înțelegere riguroasă și reînnoită a operei unui autor de o originalitate excepțională, a cărei gândire continuă să exercite o influență considerabilă la scară internațională. Din această perspectivă, volumul constituie o lectură deosebit de valoroasă și stimulatorie pentru cercetătorii și cititorii interesați de teoria politică, istoria intelectuală și tradiția marxistă.

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