# PROLOGUE

> It is known that personal identity resides in memory, and the annulment of that faculty is known to result in idiocy.
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> Jorge Luis Borges, *History of Eternity* (1936)

Some months before Donald Trump became the president of the United States, I found myself in Dresden surrounded by a mix of German neo-Nazi and xenophobic populist demonstrators. I had come to the city with my family to lead a seminar on fascism and populism at the city's university. As fate would have it, we arrived on Monday, the day that the Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the West (Pegida) held its weekly demonstration. Racist flags and angry faces encircled us. Literally, one of the most extreme examples of current populism was now standing between the hotel and us. At this point, my eldest daughter, who was eight years old at the time, asked "Are these the Nazis that killed Anne Frank?" We had visited the Anne Frank Museum in Amsterdam the previous year, and she had been quite affected by her story. No, I answered, they are not her killers, but these neo-Nazis are happy she was killed. The identification of extreme right neo-fascists and populists with

past movements has reformulated the dictatorial legacy of fascism for different democratic times and is central to understanding the connections between the past and the present. With soothing words, and in Spanish, I assured my daughters, Gabriela and Lucia, that nothing was going to happen to us because in a democracy there are limits to what violent partisans can do. I trusted that these xenophobes would not dare to move openly from their populist rhetorical demonization to fascist physical aggression. But as the history of populism shows, they would nonetheless undermine tolerance and eventually democracy. My daughters were born in New York, and the conditions would be ok there too. Was I right? Having lived under a military dictatorship in Argentina when I was their age, I remember that it would have been too dangerous to pose similar questions to my parents in public. And certainly my family and I would not have been able to walk and talk freely in the midst of military profascist demonstrations. As a young boy, I had been interested in the history of the Holocaust and in Hitler's persecution of the Jews, but the connection between those in power and fascism was not a topic that a child from a middle-class Jewish family openly talked about in Argentina.[1] Too many people had been "disappeared." But like many other citizens, I am asking them now, when populists occupy the global stage.

The first modern populist regime was born in Argentina, not the United States, but lately the world's greatest power is the one brandishing its populist might to the rest of the globe. This is something many Americans, including most social scientists, had previously deemed impossible. Having lived in the United States since 2001, I have often been told that neither populism nor fascism could ever set foot north of the Rio Grande. But especially now that populism has taken hold in the United

States, the global histories of fascism and populism offer key lessons that we should bear in mind as we enter a new era of populism in America and beyond.

If we return populism to its global history, the apparently unexpected can be better understood. This book examines the historical connections between fascism and those in power in the context of populist democracies.

Like other historians who have dedicated their academic lives to the study of fascism and populism, I have always thought studying the past could illuminate the present, and for the last two decades, my work has looked backward to understand the problematic relationships among fascism, populism, violence, and politics. Now the question of fascism and power clearly belongs to the present.

Crisis, xenophobia, and populism characterize our new century. But these traits are not new nor were they simply reborn in our present. To understand the apparent rebirth of populism is, in fact, to comprehend the history of its adoption and reformulation over time. This history starts with fascism and continues with populism in power. If this century has not left behind the history of violence, fascism, and genocide that was so central to the twentieth century, dictatorship, and especially fascistic dictatorships, has nonetheless increasingly lost legitimacy as a form of government. Inflated metaphors of Munich and Weimar aside, we are not witnessing the return of fascism as it existed before. The past is never the present. Yet the current expressions of neofascism and populism have important histories behind them, and the passage from fascism to populism over time has shaped our present. This book argues not only that contextual public and political uses of fascism and populism are key to understanding them but also that studying how these histories have

been conceived and interpreted will refresh our awareness and increase our understanding of the current political threats to democracy and equality. Contexts and concepts are key.

This book counters the idea that past and present-day experiences of fascism and populism can be reduced to particular national or regional conditions. It argues against dominant American and Eurocentric views. Especially in light of the historical turning point of Trump's populist victory, tales of American democratic exceptionalism have finally been put to rest. This new age of American populism shows clearly that the United States is like the rest of the world. Similar arguments can be made for French or German democratic culture. We now have no excuse to allow geopolitical narcissism to stand against historical interpretation, especially when analyzing ideologies that cross borders and oceans and even influence each other.

I present a historical take on populism and fascism but also offer a view from the south. In other words, I ask what happens to the center when we think about it from the margins.[2] Neither populism nor fascism is exclusively European, American, or Latin American. Populism is as American as it is Argentine. By the same token, fascism also took hold in Germany and in India. In the United States and in Europe, too many scholars explain the past and present of fascism and populism by narrowly emphasizing the American or European dimensions of what is in fact a global and transnational phenomenon. Decentering the history of fascism and populism does not mean adopting a single alternative explanation for their origins. All histories are important.

What is *fascism* and what is *populism?* These questions were first asked by some fascists, antifascists, populists, and antipopulists to validate, criticize, or distance themselves from the perceived common features associated with the terms. Their sup-

porters, and some of their staunchest critics, have repeated them ever since.[3] Then and now, actors and interpreters alike have agreed that both terms have been counterposed against liberalism; that both involve a moral condemnation of the liberal democratic order of things; and that both represent a mass response advanced by strong leaders in the name of the people, and against elites and politics as usual. But beyond these affinities, and moving past ideal types and the limits of generic interpretations, how have fascism and populism been connected historically and theoretically, and how should we address their significant differences? This book provides historical answers to these questions. While fascism and populism are at the center of political discussions, and are often conflated, they actually represent alternative political and historical trajectories. At the same time, fascism and populism are genealogically connected. They belong to the same history.

Modern populism was born out of fascism. In the same way that fascist mass politics moved popular engagements beyond democratic premodern agrarian forms of populism such as the Russian Narodniki or the American People's Party, and was also radically different from protopopulist formations such as Yrigoyenismo in Argentina or Battlismo in Uruguay, the first modern populist regimes in postwar Latin America moved away from fascism while keeping key antidemocratic features that were not as predominant in prepopulist and protopopulist movements before World War II.

A new populist modernity was born with the defeat of fascism. After the war, populism reformulated the legacies of the "anti-Enlightenment" for the Cold War era and for the first time in history became complete, that is, it achieved power.[4] By 1945, populism had come to represent a continuation of fascism but

also a renunciation of some of its defining dictatorial dimensions. Fascism put forward a violent totalitarian order that led to radical forms of political violence and genocide. In contrast, and as a result of the defeat of fascism, populism attempted to reform and retune the fascist legacy to a democratic key. After the war, populism was an outcome of the civilizational effect of fascism. The rise and fall of fascisms affected not only those like General Juan Perón in Argentina that have been close to the fascists but also many authoritarian fellow travelers such as Getulio Vargas in Brazil, or many members of the American populist right that had not experienced or agreed full heartedly with fascism in the first place. In order to reach power, postwar populism renounced its interwar, pro-dictatorial foundations but did not leave fascism entirely behind. It occupied the place of fascism as it became a new "third way" between liberalism and communism. However, unlike fascism's supporters, its proponents wanted populism to be a democratic choice. This populist intention to create a new political tradition that could rule the nation but was different from fascism, and its eventual success in doing so, explains the complex historical nature of postwar populism as a varied set of authoritarian experiments in democracy. To be sure, modern populism incorporated elements from other traditions, but the fascist origins and effects of populism after the defeat of Hitler and Mussolini shaped its postfascist constitutive tension between democracy and dictatorship.

In history, populism can be a reactionary force leading society into a more authoritarian mode, but in its progressive variants, it can also start, or advance, democratization in a situation of inequality while also undermining the rights or legitimacy of political minorities to its right and to its left. Especially in terms of the left, and particularly in the context of left populist's claims to rep-

resent the left as a whole, one should not meld together mass citizen participation and popular egalitarian social and political demands with a populist situation. Pundits often ahistorically confuse social democracy, progressive politics, and populism. One of the objectives of the book is to be clear in situating populism historically, and to be equally focused on the ethico-political need to make a distinction between populism and other democratic and emancipatory forms that are too often dismissed as populist. If populism uses xenophobia to turn society backward, as it often does in its right-wing versions, in its leftist formations populism turns society's attention to unequal social and economic conditions. More recently this has meant questioning even the dogmas of neoliberal austerity measures and the supposed neutrality of technocratic business-oriented solutions.

In all cases, populism speaks in the name of a single people, and it does so in the name of democracy. But democracy is defined in narrow terms as the expression of the desires of the populist leaders. Populism cannot be simplistically defined by its claim to exclusively represent the entire people against the elites. It is not only that populists want to act in the name of all the people, they also believe that their leader *is* the people and should be a surrogate for the citizens in making all decisions. The global histories of populism show that it has generally had a constitutive beginning when the leader becomes the people. But though the leader in theory personifies the people, in practice he or she represents only his or her followers (and voters), which populists conceive as the expression of an entire people. The leader replaces the people, becoming their voice. In other words, the voice of the people can only be expressed through the mouth of the leader. It is in the persona of the leader that the nation and the people can finally recognize themselves and participate in politics. In fact, without a

conception of the charismatic and messianic leader, populism is an incomplete historical form. Understanding populism without its authoritarian notion of leadership and its aim of reaching power through electoral means, therefore, is difficult. These absolute claims on people and leadership encapsulate not only the populist understanding of how populists in the opposition and campaign modes should severely question the state of a democracy but also how that democracy should be ruled when populists reach power. Ultimately, and in practice, populism replaces representation with the transfer of authority to the leader. From left to right, this constitutes the ideology of populism, which is the need for a more authoritarian form of democracy. In other words, when a populist wins the will of the circumstantial electoral majority, its will is conflated with the desires of the leader, who acts in the name of the "real" people.

As Andrew Arato, a leading scholar of political and social theory, explains, in populism, the part becomes the whole. That is, a fictional united people is invented to be led and incarnated by authoritarian leaders. "The people," in fact, is a concept that accounts for many diverse peoples living in a nation. Its translation into a single united people embodied in a leader is a key historical recurrence in populism. This historical process, by which the people created from a section of the citizens first become One, then are appropriated by a movement, and finally are incarnated in the authoritarian leadership of a constructed subject (the united and undifferentiated people) that does not actually exist, has clear undemocratic effects. But for the populists, it is the enemy that is against democracy, not them.[5] From the Argentine populist left to the populists on the French and German extreme right, populists have argued that they are defending the people from tyranny and dictatorship. For populists, dictatorship is viewed not so much as a

past form of government but as a metaphor for the enemy in the present. This allows them to equate democracy with populism while neatly associating its opposite (tyranny or dictatorship) with the political foe, be it anti-Peronism in Argentina, imperialism in Venezuela, or the European Union in France and Germany. To be sure, all of these actors have, or have had, authoritarian dimensions, but they are not part of the populist caricaturization of the political enemy. Populists are not greatly concerned with the subtleties of empirical observation but instead direct their attention toward reworking, even reinventing, reality in accordance with their varied ideological imperatives. Living inside the populist bubble allows leaders, regimes, and followers to present everything they dislike as lies of the media and as internal and external conspiracies against the people, the leader, and the nation. Here populism relates directly to fascism's classic refusal to determine the truth empirically.[6]

A distinction between populism and liberalism, as well as between populism and socialism, is that liberalism and socialism must empirically confront their failures, which they typically, though not always, do. Populists think differently. Everyone opposing them is turned into a tyrannical entity. In this context, democracy and dictatorship are just designations for the self and the other. They become images of the populist vision and are no longer categories of political analysis. This transformation of concepts into images is a key dimension of populism's take on a similar fascist trait, long ago noted by Walter Benjamin—namely, the aestheticization of politics. This emphasis on politics as spectacle accompanies populism whenever it shifts from an opposition movement to a regime.

If important, even essential, differences exist between the manifold populisms of the left and the right, populism generally

presents a stark contrast when it moves from the opposition to take on the quite different role of the regime. In opposition, populism appears as a protest movement and makes clear the limits that governing elites have in representing important segments of society, but it also claims that it represents society as a whole. As a regime, populism sees no limits on its claims to popular sovereignty, identifying the votes of electoral majorities who support the regime with the structural, transcendental desires of the people and the nation. As the opposition, populism often contributes to an understanding of the frustrations but also to the outing of the long-held prejudices of large elements of the population. As a regime, populism claims the full representation of an entire people and often translates this into the idea of full delegation of power to the leader. In this context, the leader claims to know what the people truly want better than they do.

Unlike fascists, populists most often play the democratic game and will eventually cede power after losing an election. That's because populism, though similar to fascism in conflating itself with the nation and the people, links these totalizing claims of popular national representation to electoral decisions. In other words, populism projects a plebiscitary understanding of politics and rejects the fascist form of dictatorship.

Populism is an authoritarian form of democracy. Defined historically, it thrives in contexts of real or imagined political crises, wherein populism offers itself as antipolitics. It claims to do the work of politics while keeping itself free from the political process. Democracy in this sense simultaneously increases the political participation of real or imagined majorities while it excludes, and limits the rights of, political, sexual, ethnic, and religious minorities. As noted above, populism conceives the people as One—namely, as a single entity consisting of leader, followers,

and nation. This trinity of popular sovereignty is rooted in fascism but is confirmed by votes. Populism stands against liberalism, but for electoral politics. Therefore, we can better understand populism if we think of it as an original historical reformulation of fascism that first came to power after 1945. Populism's homogenizing view of the people conceives of political opponents as the antipeople. Opponents become enemies: nemeses who, consciously or unconsciously, stand for the oligarchical elites and for a variety of illegitimate outsiders. Populism defends an illuminated nationalist leader who speaks and decides for the people. It downplays the separation of powers, the independence and legitimacy of a free press, and the rule of law. In populism, democracy is challenged but not destroyed.

As I finish this book, a new populism has taken the world's reins. Once again, the electoral success of a narcissistic leader has come with offending, and downplaying the value of, others. Intolerance and discrimination have opened the way for a definition of the people that relies simultaneously on inclusion and exclusion. As in the past, this new, recharged populism challenges democracy from within, but history teaches us that democratic institutions and a strong civil society can forcefully challenge populists in power. In short, we can learn from historical instances of resistance.

When modern populism emerged, the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges stated that, having been thrown out of Berlin, fascism had migrated to Buenos Aires. The regimes of Germany and Argentina advanced oppression, servitude, and cruelty, but it was even "more abominable that they promote[d] idiocy." Even if he problematically conflated fascism (a dictatorship) and populism (an authoritarian electoral form of democracy), Borges acutely revealed why and how they both endorsed stupidity and

the absence of historical thinking. They ignored lived experiences and affirmed crass mythologies. If in his elitism he was not able to recognize why the new populism was an inclusive choice for people who felt unrepresented, Borges still clearly noted its defining "sad" monotony. Diversity was replaced with imperatives and symbols. In this early analysis of populists in history, Borges stressed how their leaders turned politics into lies. Reality became melodrama. They twisted everything into fictions "which can't be believed and were believed." Like Borges, we need to remember that fascism and populism must be faced with empirical truths, or, as he put it, we need to distinguish between "legend and reality." In times like this, the past reminds us that fascism and populism are themselves subject to the forces of history.[7]

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