Review Essay

Should we be afraid? Liberal democracy, democratic backsliding, and contemporary populism

From Fascism to Populism in History

Federico Finchelstein

Oakland, University of California Press, 2017, 328 pp.,

ISBN: 978-0-520-29519

How Democracies Die: What History Reveals about our Future

Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt

New York, Penguin Random House, 2018, 312 pp.,

ISBN: 978-0241-31798-3

The People vs. Democracy: Why our Freedom is in Danger and How to Save it

Yascha Mounk

Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2018, 393 pp.,

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With Donald Trump's presidential victory, the doubtful respect that populist leaders in Poland, Hungary, and Turkey have for democratic institutions, and the growing support for populist parties across Europe, the question of whether to be anxious on behalf of liberal democracy is much discussed in political theory and beyond. Whether populism is a threat to liberal democracy, or a much-needed re-politicization of the elitist nature of contemporary democratic systems, is indeed a controversial issue about which political theorists differ. How much political disagreement can exist *in* a democracy before such disagreements become disagreements *about* democracy? Is the normative ideal of liberal democracy being threatened by 'illiberal democracies,' such as Viktor Orbán's Hungary, and/or by 'undemocratic liberalism,' such as the market-oriented politics of the European Union?

Three new books written by Federico Finchelstein, Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt, and Yascha Mounk take issue with these questions on the threats to liberal democracy by present-day democratic backsliding and contemporary populism.

Their methodological approaches differ, as do their critical diagnoses, but taken together they provide enlightening, interesting, and alarming insights into the present political situation.

Finchelstein's book *From Fascism to Populism in History* (2017) takes a distinct historiographical approach, as he maps the conceptual, rhetorical, and political differences between the classical fascism of the 1930s, and what he calls 'populism as postfascism' (p. 18) emerging in the post-WW2 era. Finchelstein concludes that contemporary populism is a form of 'postfascism for democratic times' (p. 251), implying that contemporary populists continue some of the central ideological tenets of classical fascism – such as a logic of incarnation between 'the people' and their leader, a politics of enmity, a critique of independent institutions, and a call for a more unmediated popular will (p. 105) – while at the same time acknowledging the legitimacy of political representation (p. 183).

In *How Democracies Die: What History Reveals about our Future* (2018), Levitsky and Ziblatt employ a comparative and historical approach as they evaluate Trump's actions and rhetoric in light of prior examples of democratic backsliding in the US and democratic breakdown in Germany and Italy in the 1930s, Chile in the 1970s, and Venezuela in the 1990s. Although Levitsky and Ziblatt argue that during his first year as president of the United States Trump tested positive on what they call the 'key indicators of authoritarian behavior' (pp. 65–67), they survey American political history in order to demonstrate that the election of Trump is not the independent cause of the erosion of democratic norms, but rather the effect of deeper problems within American political culture (pp. 167–172).

In *The People vs. Democracy: Why our Freedom is in Danger and How to Save it* (2018), Mounk argues that liberal democracy is decomposing into its component parts (p. 20), meaning that we are faced either with developments of illiberal democracies run by populist demagogues, what Mounk calls 'democracies without rights,' or with the emergence of undemocratic liberalism run by technocratic elites, what Mounk calls 'rights without democracy' (p. 14). Mounk's contribution is an exercise in political sociology, as he analyzes how contemporary liberal democracies are challenged by these two emerging ideological reconfigurations, but he also provides a call to arms to all those who cherish liberal democracy to fight for its continuation and further development (pp. 264–266).

This review essay discusses how each of these important scholarly interventions envisions the contemporary political crisis, how we got here, and what can be done to rescue liberal democracy in the future.

The underlying question, which Finchelstein's historical comparison of fascism and populism is to answer, is one that is thrown around a lot in public debate: Is Trump a fascist? More generally, are contemporary populists heirs to the fascist ideology of the 20th century, or do they rather operate with a different understanding of democracy, which nonetheless can be included as one variant within the 'broad church'? Political thinker William Connolly has, for example,

called Trump ‘an aspirational fascist,’ who, although he ‘is not a Nazi,’ employs a rhetorical strategy that ‘echoes to those of Hitler’ (2017, pp. 7, 11). So, according to Finchelstein’s analysis, what are the similarities and differences between fascism and populism?

Fascism is a political ideology based on the sovereign will of the people, but without political representation as a means of expressing this will (pp. 86–87). Instead, fascism sets in motion a logic of incarnation between the leader (*Führer*) and the people, granting the leader the sole insight into the people’s desires (p. 75–76). Dictatorship is thus the political form of fascism, as the fascist leader-dictator knows what the people want, as the people is conceptualized as homogenous (p. 17). Through such a logic of incarnation, Finchelstein argues, fascism is a return to a corporatist, nationalist, religious, and monarchical world order, but – crucially – after the advent of popular sovereignty (pp. 40–41). That is the reason why the fascist leader must claim to speak with the voice of the people, to be its true and only representative. Like Ernst Kantorowicz’ famous description of the dual body of the sovereign monarch (Kantorowicz, 1957), the fascist leader has a dual character, according to Finchelstein. He is both a man of the people, an ordinary person, but at the same time a mythical or almost sacred individual with extraordinary insights into the wishes of his people. One way in which fascism achieves the incarnation between leader and people, Finchelstein argues, is through the strategy of violence (p. 24). Through violence, a new form of existence beyond liberalism, rationality, and bureaucratism can be obtained. The author thinks violence, enmity, and struggle to be integral parts of fascist ideology (pp. 41–45).

This description of fascism is not novel in itself. Instead, Finchelstein’s timely intervention is to discuss the phenomenon of populism up against the description of fascism. He uses different expressions to characterize the relationship between fascism and populism: populism is ‘postfascism’ (p. 18), ‘a postfascist, authoritarian and illiberal version of democracy’ (p. 22); fascism is ‘the foundation of modern populism’ (p. 23). Thus, on the one hand, populism continues the fascist understanding of politics as a Schmittian struggle between friend and enemy – this time expressed as the conflict between the corrupt elites and the pure people (p. 20); it continues the logic of incarnation between the populist leader and the people, with leaders like Trump, Le Pen, Orbán, and others claiming to have privileged access to the will of the people (pp. 103–104). As Finchelstein puts it, ‘in both fascist dictatorships and populist democracy, the leader is construed as the representative and embodiment of the people, or as the personification of the people, the nation, and the nation’s history’ (p. 252).

On the other hand, though, populism breaks with the fascist practice of violence (p. 181) and acknowledges elections as legitimate (p. 99). If social democracy represents socialism’s electoral road to power, Finchelstein suggests that populism represents fascism’s electoral path. As such, populism is a form of democracy, as populists respect the legitimacy of political elections, but it is an authoritarian and

illiberal form thereof: opponents are understood as enemies, ‘the people’ is conceptualized as homogenous, and the populist leader claims to speak with the true voice of the people. By refraining from violence and accepting political representation, populism is a form of ‘postfascism for democratic times’ (p. 251).

With Finchelstein’s comparison of fascism and populism, there are indeed reasons to be afraid for liberal democracy, given how populism is gaining electoral success around the globe. Although populism is ‘historically located somewhere between fascism and liberalism,’ when populists come into power they ‘constantly drew on the residues of the former to challenge the latter’ (p. 247).

Whereas Finchelstein’s book focuses on fascism and populism as global phenomena, Levitsky and Ziblatt concentrate mostly on American political history in order to explain how a character like Donald Trump could be elected president in 2016. They observe that democratic breakdowns today do not happen most often via violent insurrections, but by the hands of what they call ‘would be autocrats’ (p. 5) – by legitimately elected demagogues. As Levitsky and Ziblatt acknowledge, this electoral road to authoritarianism is ‘dangerously deceptive’ (p. 5): the dismantling of democratic norms is slow, piecemeal, and ‘almost imperceptible’ (p. 6). In order to detect such subtle erosion of democracy, Levitsky and Ziblatt provide four key indicators of authoritarian behavior by democratically elected leaders (pp. 23–24). These are (1) the weak commitment to democratic rules, such as employing extra-constitutional means or undermining the legitimacy of elections, (2) denying the legitimacy of political opponents, (3) tolerating or encouraging violence, and (4) curtailing the civil liberties of opponents and the media. According to the authors, Trump tested positive on all four indicators during his first year as president, as he publicly stated that he would not accept the results of the election should he lose (indicator 1); he threatened to imprison Hillary Clinton (indicator 2); he repeatedly instigated violence (indicator 3); and he repeatedly condemned the media and questioned their neutrality (indicator 4) (pp. 65–67).

In order to answer the question of why Trump could be elected president, despite his displaying authoritarian tendencies during the campaign, Levitsky and Ziblatt provide a tour de force through American political history. Invoking figures like Charles Lindbergh, Father Charles Coughlin, George Wallace, and Senator Joseph McCarthy (pp. 33–37), the authors argue that Trump is not the first ‘would-be autocrat’ to seek public power in America. The reason why such figures did not ascend to the presidency or other vital public offices is because, in the past, the American political system had well-functioning gatekeeping mechanisms, as well as robust democratic norms. The primary gatekeepers of American politics have been the political parties with control over the selection of presidential candidates – there has always been a ‘smoke-filled backroom,’ charged with the task of keeping out demagogues (p. 41). However, as American society was shaken in its foundations during the late 1960s, citizens demanded a more open, transparent, and inclusive process of presidential nomination. The so-called McGovern-Fraser Commission recommended that presidential primaries

be made binding, thereby ending the political parties' control over presidential nominations. This crucial change did not by itself create the possibility of electing a 'would-be authoritarian' like Trump. As Levitsky and Ziblatt argue, two crucial, but unwritten, democratic norms have historically fended off authoritarian candidates and policies (pp. 102–111). The first is mutual tolerance, which implies 'that as long as our rivals play by constitutional rules, we accept that they have an equal right to exist, compete for power, and govern' (p. 102). This norm implies that, although parties disagree on certain policies, they do not vision their opponents as illegitimate. According to Levitsky and Ziblatt, apart from the Civil War, mutual tolerance has always characterized American politics. Secondly, the norm of institutional forbearance implies that political actors refrain from using the letter of the law against the spirit of the law (p. 106). Such institutional forbearance means, for example, allowing a president of the opposing party to secure the nomination of members of the Supreme Court, despite not having a majority in Congress. According to Levitsky and Ziblatt, these norms of tolerance and forbearance are no longer effective in American politics, as exemplified recently by the Republicans' denial of President Obama's nomination of Judge Merrick Garland to fill the empty seat on the Supreme Court in 2016.

The erosion of the norms of tolerance and forbearance is crucial in explaining the election of Trump. As the Democrats and the Republicans now tend to view each other as existential enemies, and as both parties use every political tool available, almost no Republican leader or Congressperson declared against Trump and endorsed Hillary Clinton. With the 'smoke-filled backrooms' abolished and democratic norms eroded, the scene was set for the election of a 'would-be autocrat' like Trump.

The most alarming part of the book's analysis is the explanation of *why* the norms of mutual tolerance and institutional forbearance have eroded in the US since the late 1960s. The authors show that, after the civil rights movement of the 1960s successfully democratized the country and helped citizens of color exercise their political rights, American politics has only become ever more polarized. Before the civil rights movement, the Democratic and Republican parties were so-called 'big tents' (p. 169), displaying internal disagreements and pluralism. But with the politicization of race, the two parties slowly realigned to the extent that they are now deeply divided on questions of race, religion, class, and education, displaying an unprecedented degree of intense partisan animosity (pp. 167–172). Such intense enmity makes political actors value short-term electoral victories over their opponents rather than long-term survival of the democratic system. Figures like Trump prosper enormously from such a situation. It might well be the case that Trump will not be re-elected in 2020, but the upshot of the analysis is that if democratic norms are not restored, and if the intense enmity and polarization within American politics is not overcome, another 'would-be autocrat' is most likely to have a very good chance of conquering the White House. The crisis of American politics, according to the authors, is hence neither transient nor shallow, but systemic and fundamental.

The last book, Mounk's *The People vs. Democracy: Why our Freedom is in Danger and How to Save It*, focuses explicitly on the many ways in which liberal democracy is in crisis. Mounk acknowledges that liberal democracy is a unique political regime, which combines a mechanism for translating popular opinion into public policy (the democratic component), while it at the same establishes the rule of law and safeguards individual and minority rights (the liberal element) (p. 27). As such, contemporary liberal democracy can be destabilized, Mounk argues, if either of these two elements goes missing. On the one hand, many populist parties promote a politics of 'illiberal democracy,' when they – as Finchelstein's intervention also made clear – hope to make public policy an unmediated expression of the will of the people (or at least their ethnicized, homogenous conception of 'the people') – even if this means the violation of individual or minority rights (pp. 29–52). On the other hand, the rise of 'undemocratic liberalism' is slowly draining the law-making capacities of the people's representatives, as elected parliaments across the globe are losing political power to bureaucrats, central banks, courts, international organizations, and global businesses (pp. 53–98).

Mounk's argument is primarily political-sociological and contains a diagnosis of contemporary politics, a discussion of its root causes, as well as a series of recommendations for saving liberal democracy. Behind the electoral success of populist movements there is, according to Mounk, an alarming dissatisfaction with liberal democracy, which leads to 'the fear that democracy is no longer the only game in town' (p. 105). Mounk presents survey data reporting that more and more people, and especially young people, regard democracy as less important than prior generations; more people are more open to authoritarian forms of rule, displaying a growing disrespect for democratic norms (p. 105–120). Mounk suggests that the origin of this normative shift is threefold, as he points to crucial transformations in what he calls the three 'scope conditions' of democratic deconsolidation (p. 135): the new landscape of social media, rising economic inequality and growing multiculturalism. By pointing to these 'scope conditions,' Mounk rightly highlights that explanations of the emergence of populism and democratic dissatisfaction cannot be mono-causal, but rather that 'economic and cultural anxieties reinforce each other' (p. 136). Whereas the new landscape of social media dispenses with the traditional gatekeepers for information and allows for a more rapid spread of extreme ideas, such extreme ideas are, according to Mounk, nourished by increasing economic inequality and rising multiculturalism, which challenge the 'monoethnic footing' on which most democratic states have been founded (p. 166) – or at least officially believe themselves to have been founded upon. Mounk explains the uncontested popularity of liberal democracy in the post-WW2 era with the persistent economic growth and hence with the constant betterment of living conditions. This optimism about the future has been replaced with anxiety, and a feeling that the political system does not favor the large group of ordinary working people (p. 156). Along with this economic anxiety for the future, Mounk highlights – as did Levitsky and Ziblatt – how growing

multiculturalism challenges established hierarchies as well as fundamental ideas concerning who counts as part of ‘the people.’

To counter these alarming tendencies, Mounk shifts the register from political sociology to political theory. To counter the rise of nationalist populism, ‘we need to forge a new language of inclusive patriotism,’ which ought to ‘build on the tradition of multiethnic democracy’ (p. 208). Essential to such an ‘inclusive patriotism’ is ‘to show that the ties that bind us go well beyond ethnicity and religion’ (p. 208). What Mounk seems to have in mind is a distinctive political conception of citizenship that stresses a common allegiance to democratic values. One might wonder how such a strategy is to function, when the survey data analyzed by Mounk suggest that it is precisely these democratic values that are disputed, if not declining. To counter the rising economic inequality and distress with the elitism of established politics, Mounk proposes to restore basic elements of the welfare state, including investing in education, infrastructure, housing, research, and health care (pp. 220–221). And to counter the spread of fake news and enclosed and extreme online publics, he suggests renewing civic faith and rebuilding trust through multiple educational and civic initiatives (pp. 235–345).

Mounk concludes with a call to action, as he asks us to remember that liberal democracy is not a natural outcome of political modernity. ‘Over the past decades,’ he argues, ‘our habits were shaped by the favorable circumstances in which we lived,’ meaning that ‘the age-old belief that political liberty needs to be defended anew by each generation came to seem increasingly arcane’ (p. 251). But today, according to Mounk, liberal democracy can only be safeguarded against ‘illiberal democracy’ and ‘undemocratic liberalism’ if ‘those of us who truly care about our values and our institutions are determined to fight for our convictions without regard for the consequences’ (p. 266).

Taken together, these three books paint an alarming picture of our contemporary political situation. One of the disturbing insights of Mounk’s book, for example, is that contemporary populism is fueled by dynamics in globalization that are not easily or even desirably rolled back, as ‘the nostalgia of the populists promises people an era in which their country will go back to being great ... citizens want their nation to be able to make its own decisions, unencumbered by the constraints of the global economy’ (p. 235). Or, as the books by Levitsky and Ziblatt, and by Mounk both suggest, historically the support for liberal democracy was most profound when economic conditions were good and when ‘the people’ was ethnically homogenous. It seems as if populist, illiberal democracy is an almost automatic counter-response to the growing global interdependence, ethnic plurality, and border-transgressing nature of contemporary political phenomena, such as climate change, the flow of refugees, and global trade. Moreover, if populism is only a slightly more benign form of politics compared to classical fascism, as Finchelstein seems to suggest, the growing populist support is indeed deeply worrying.

Reading the three books together, one can observe two different ways to counter populism and save liberal democracy. The first solution is predominantly economic and revolves around re-establishing a sense of security and safety, rebuilding the welfare state and redistributing economic resources within each democratic state. This approach could be called the ‘social democratic approach’ and builds on the hypothesis that as long as the people are well-fed, secure, and prosperous, they refrain from revolution and revolt. This strategy has some credibility.

But as populism is indeed also on the rise in very prosperous, secure, and equal societies such as Denmark, Sweden, and the Netherlands, a second distinctively political and transnational strategy could also be employed to counter populism. Such a strategy, which is not mentioned in all three books under review, centers on the loss of political control that, according to Mounk, animates populism. If political problems are transgressing borders and are global in scope, democratic communities need to be border-transgressing and global if ordinary people are to regain a sense of political control. So far, a global network of institutions is wrestling with the most pressing political problems – a system of ‘undemocratic liberalism’ in Mounk’s phrasing. Just as the modern state was gradually democratized through revolutions on both sides of the Atlantic, one way to counter contemporary populism and rising authoritarianism could be to work for the democratization of existing transnational structures of decision-making, such as the WTO, EU, and G7, but also to work for the creation of new and genuinely democratic forums of decision-making on a regional, transnational, and global scale.

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