POPULISM AS A PERMUTATION OF FASCISM

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I. INTRODUCTION

Populism, particularly in its contemporary European, American, and Israeli versions, can be--and perhaps ought to be--conceptualized as an ideological permutation of fascism: Both populism and fascism are predicated upon a notion of an exclusive peoplehood, which endeavors to act directly and beyond any set of liberal and democratic institutions, through an exclusive leadership. Consequently, their effects, both internal and international, on liberal and democratic societies can be rather destructive.

First, both populism and fascism depict society, as divided into at least two segments: the "authentic" and the "others". They both imagine "authentic" people as a political body with determined identity, interests, and borders. Whereas liberalism and democracy conceive the identity of peoplehood as evolving through internal and external challenges & opportunities, both populism and fascism portray the identity of peoplehood as fix. Typically both populism and fascism color peoplehood in ethnic terms, that is, as stemming from a single and common ancestry, and sharing distinct history, culture, symbols, and attitudes. As a result, it is very difficult, if not altogether impossible, for individuals and groups, that do not participate in these common history and culture, to really integrate into that peoplehood. At most, their join in is "superficial" or "artificial".

Likewise, whereas liberalism and democracy define the interests of a people as ever changeable--according to the fluctuating identity and circumstances of that people--both populism and fascism picture them as permanent, or at least almost invariable. Subsequently, whereas liberalism and democracy require large degrees of internal competition among various conceptions of interests of a people, both populism and fascism regard any such internal contest as a schism, if not a potential for a civil war between "authentic" people and "inauthentic" people--between the "true" people, the "ins", and its deceived, corrupted or sinful edges, the "outs". These "outs" could be positioned in the elites, be they academic, artistic, economic or political, and/or at the poor and disgraced echelons of society. Insofar as such schism can originate from deceit and corruption, either internal or external to that people, both populism and fascism treat free thought, expression, and exchange of ideas as harmful. Therefore, both target thinkers, researchers, and journalists as "inauthentic", "untruthful", "fake", or even as dangerous. In their more aggressive versions, both populism and fascism seek to threaten the legal and economic foundations of free thought and expression, and even to take over the media, schools, academia, arts scenes, and other sources of information and critique.

Second, whereas liberalism and democracy regularly curtail the active appearances of "the people", both populism and fascism march the direct actions of "the people" to the fore. Liberalism and democracy restrict the direct actions of "the people" to relatively infrequent and well-defined episodes, such as a finite formulation of a constitution, and periodical general elections and plebiscites, as well as to essentially symbolic and indecisive rituals, such as "National Day" or "Independence Day". The main public arenas of liberalism and democracy are dominated by competing and institutionalized representations of "the view(s)" and "the will(s)" of "the people", in the forms of political parties in parliaments, national and local governments, courts, trade unions, social associations & exc. Thus, they routinely divide and channel "the people" into foci and voices, whose relations are of mutual checks and balances. Regularly and continuously, "the voice" of "the people" hardly plays a decisive role in liberal and democratic politics. By contrast, both populism and fascism endeavor to extract and "liberate" "the people" from the internal divisions and restrictions, that modernity in general, and liberalism and democracy in particular, have imposed on it. Instead of those chains, both populism and fascism seek to reinvigorate "the people" to act in a unified and direct manner, above and beyond any liberal or democratic norm, usually in a Sorelian mythical or actual potency or even violence. Such "acts of the people" could assume the form of general elections or plebiscite, but they are not supposed in both populism and fascism to be channeled into a system of authorities that check and balance each other.
Rather, they are conceived of as sidelining, upsetting and even nullifying the liberal and democratic institutions of checks and balances. Both populism and fascism thus venture to recover the vitality and potency of "the people" from the dissections and

passivity that liberalism and democracy seem to have imprisoned them. Both populism and fascism present themselves as insurgent movements, that rescue the "power of the people" from the schisms and yokes that liberalism and democracy have shackled it with.

Third, since both populism and fascism portray "the people" as chained by liberalism and democracy, they both require a leadership to rally, (re)unify, and lead, if not free, "the people". Whereas liberalism and democracy perceive "the people" as regularly present in, and through, rival institutions and leaderships, both populism and fascism claim that "the people" suffers from lack of at least effective presence in political life. In this sense, both populism and fascism originate from a claim about a permanent and primordial absence of popular representation. Fundamentally, whereas liberalism and democracy insist on the open-ended and flexible identity and interests of peoplehood, and therefore of their representation, both populism and fascism necessitate an exclusive representation of the "identity" and "will" of "the people".

Therefore, while both liberalism and democracy treasure pluralism in general, and political competition and opposition in particular, both populism and fascism enshrine homogeneous and exclusive representation of "the people". Political rivalry is hence colored as "inauthentic", "elitist", or even as "treacherous", "disloyal" and "treasonable".

To be certain, populism and fascism do not reject as a matter of principle democratic mechanisms of general elections and plebiscites, but can even embrace them as desirable or necessary for the resurgence of "the people". However, both populism and fascism reject the basic legitimacy of political pluralism and competition, and replace them with a struggle for the salvation of "the people" from "inauthentic" at best, and "traitorous" at worst, forces of liberalism and democracy.

Therefore, free and fair elections or referenda may be subversive or even dangerous from the viewpoint of both populist and fascist leaderships. In short, both populist and fascist leaders can wholeheartedly embrace democratic elections and plebiscites on their rise to power, and insofar as these democratic procedures appear to serve them. Yet, once in power, they may endeavor to manipulate, if not block, them, among other ways, by monopolizing the media, courts, police, army, and schools. Both populist and fascist can advocate democratic division and rotation of power, and behave like legitimate democratic opposition on their rise to power, but delegitimize any division or rotation of power once they assume power. This ambiguity can render highly difficult and confusing the detection and obstruction of populist and fascist leaders and movements on their way up.

Fourth, both populism and fascism do not correspond to traditional ideological categorizations, such as those between "right" and "left", conservativism and progressivism, liberalism and socialism, or neo-liberalism and welfare state. Rather, they can evolve in or along both camps. Both populists and fascists can be rightist, like Francisco Franco, Marine Le Pen, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Benjamin Netanyahu, Jaroslaw Kaczysnki, and Viktor Orban, or leftist, like Ernest Roehm, Lyndon LaRouche, Jeremy Corbyn, Daniel Ortega, Evo Morales, and Hugo Chaves. Furthermore, they can pretend to overcome these traditional ideological distinctions through ideological syntheses, like Benito Mussolini's Corporatism, or through ideologically arbitrary propaganda, like Donald Trump's economic protectionism. What all of them share is a vehement denial of liberal and democratic openness with regard to the identity and interest of peoplehood and their representation.

CONCLUSION

In sum, there are at least four fundamental ideological similarities between fascism and contemporary populism. Consequently, their actual and potential effects on both democratic and international norms and establishments could be destructive in similar fashions. For example, one could compare the results of the withdrawal of fascist Italy and Nazi Germany from the League of Nations with the potential outcomes of the exit of the Trump Administration from international treaties and forums and its alleged contemplation of extracting itself from international security organizations, the most important of whom is arguably NATO.

Nevertheless, I hope that their practical implications would proved to be dissimilar, first and foremost due to the radical differences in their international and military environments, and perhaps also thanks to the ability of many of us to learn from the historical catastrophes our parents and grandparents had to endure.

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