

INTERVIEW

Fascisms Old and New - What does fascism mean in the twenty-first century?

Wednesday 6 February 2019, by [ALLEN Nicolas](#), [CORTES Martín](#), [TRAVERSO Enzo](#) (Date first published: 4 February 2019).

The rise of Bolsanaro in Brazil, Trump in the US, and the far right throughout Europe has the word “fascism” on everyone’s lips. But that rising Right is distinct from twentieth-century fascism in key ways.

France, Italy, Hungary, Poland, Austria, even onetime outliers like Spain and Germany — the list of countries falling under the shadow of the far right is growing. Bolsonaro’s triumph in Brazil and Trump’s presidency in the United States has opened a debate about the planetary scale of what once seemed a European-based phenomenon.

The debate inevitably returns to the question of fascism. How do we make sense of far-right movements that evoke its memory but emerge in a radically different historical context, speaking a different language from the twentieth century’s “blood and soil”?

In *The New Faces of Fascism* [1], historian Enzo Traverso takes aim at this moving target. The result is “post-fascism,” Traverso’s attempt to formulate an answer that can account for historical continuities and discontinuities between classical fascism and a radical right that bears a strong family resemblance.

Nicolas Allen and Martín Cortés spoke with Traverso to discuss the radical right’s attempt at self-reinvention and how the Left, too, might reinvent itself and keep pace.

Nicolas Allen (NA), Martín Cortés (MC)

Contemporary debates about fascism and populism often get bogged down in semantics. In *The New Faces of Fascism*, you adopt a different approach. You’re more concerned with how those words are used in public discourse and what they can reveal about the “public uses of history.” Can you say a few words about the general inspiration for the book?

Enzo Traverso (ET)

Interpretations of the past cannot be dissociated from its public use in the present. I am interested in conceptualizing fascism, but this effort is not just historiographical, and it isn’t politically “neutral.” For instance, I distinguish between fascism and populism: the first means destroying democracy; the second is a political style that can take different, sometimes opposite, directions, but is usually within a democratic framework.

I’m not sure how to parse the notion of fascism today. It is often abused. Usually, the threat of the return of fascism has been a concern of the Left. Today it has become a refrain of the elites who are under threat by right-wing populism and post-fascism (think of Madeleine Albright and Robert Kagan in the US, or Matteo Renzi in Italy).

The kind of “antifascist” united front that the traditional elites propose, however, hides their own responsibility for creating the conditions that allowed the new radical right to emerge and spread, from Eastern to Western Europe, from the US to Brazil.

The general inspiration for my book lies in a question: what does fascism mean in the twenty-first century? Should we consider the rise of the new right on a global scale as a return to the classical fascism of the 1930s, or rather as a completely new phenomenon? How to define and how to contrast it?

NA MC

Based on its title, one might think that the book is about “neofascism.” Instead, you claim that the rightward drift in European politics is a “post-fascist” phenomenon, tied to classical fascism but also distant from it. Can you briefly explain why the difference matters?

ET

Neofascism, the movements that claim to be affiliated with classical fascism, is a marginal phenomenon. One of the keys to the new radical right’s success lies in their depiction of themselves as something new. Either they do not have fascist origins (Trump or Salvini), or they broke significantly with their own past (Marine Le Pen, who banned her father from the National Front).

The new right is nationalist, racist, and xenophobic. In most Western European countries, at least those where the radical right is in power or has grown significantly stronger, it adopts a democratic and republican rhetoric. It has changed its language, its ideology, and its style.

In other words, it has abandoned its old fascist habits, but it has not become a completely different thing yet. It is not yet a normal component of our political systems.

On the one hand, the new far right is no longer fascist; on the other hand, we cannot define it without comparing it with fascism. The new right is a hybrid thing that might return to fascism, or it could turn into a new form of conservative, authoritarian, populist democracy. The concept of post-fascism tries to capture this.

It is impossible today to predict its future evolution. On this point, the comparison with the twentieth-century interwar period is important: in both cases, there is a lack of international order. The chaos after the Great War was the result of a breakdown in the so-called “Concert of Europe” — nineteenth-century classical liberalism — and today it is a consequence of the end of the Cold War. Fascism and post-fascism have been born from this chaotic and fluctuating situation.

NA MC

You offer France’s National Front as the textbook example of post-fascism. Does the ascent of Vox in Spain or Salvini’s Italy encourage you to nuance any aspects of the basic working definition of post-fascism, or do you see them as confirming your broad conceptual outline?

ET

The success of the far right in France, Italy, Hungary, Austria, Poland, and more recently in both Spain and Germany, two countries that were usually considered as exceptions, reinforces a general tendency. The French National Front was a forerunner. Obviously, this opens a dramatic question about the future of the European Union. I don’t think that the EU can survive if these post-fascist movements in both Western and Central European countries are victorious in the next spring EU elections. It probably would not disappear overnight, but the collapse of the EU would become

inevitable in the medium-term.

The rise of these reactionary and nationalistic “Europhobic” movements, however, is a product of the policies implemented over twenty years by the EU Commission itself. The EU has become a tool of financial capitalism that has imposed its rules onto all its governments through a compulsory legal structure, made of a complex system of laws sometimes inscribed into constitutions.

The most spectacular achievement of neoliberal elites has been to transform their own social bankruptcy — in 2008, they were saved by the states — into a financial crisis of the states themselves, who have supposedly been spending money beyond their means and should now transform themselves into profitable and competitive institutions. After two Commission presidents like Barroso (today a Goldman Sachs advisor) and Junker (the former leader of a fiscal paradise like Luxemburg); after the Greek crisis and ten years of austerity policies on a continental scale, the rise of right-wing populist leaders like Matteo Salvini and Viktor Orbán is not striking at all: “The sleep of reason engenders monsters.”

We cannot struggle effectively against post-fascism by defending the EU. It is by changing the EU that we can defeat nationalism and right-wing populism.

NA MC

Much of your analysis centers on France. There, it almost seems like the new far-right is actually better understood as a return of the repressed: that the mainstreaming of the National Front is a process of making explicit the authoritarian, colonial history at the root of the Fifth Republic. Is this correct? If so, could it extend to other countries struggling with far-right tendencies?

ET

In Europe, a xenophobic and racist wave directed against Asian and African immigrants inevitably has a neocolonial flavor. Muslim immigrants and refugees, who are its targets, come from former European colonies. This is a “return of the repressed” that impressively reveals the persistence of a European colonial unconscious. But the old colonial and racist rhetoric has been abandoned.

The National Front is no longer a movement of nostalgic harbingers of French Algeria; it now depicts itself as a defender of French national identity threatened by globalization, mass immigration, and Islamic fundamentalism. This neocolonial posture can include republican and “progressive” habits: on the one hand, they wish to preserve the Christian roots of France and Europe against the Islamic “invasion”; on the other, they pretend to defend human rights (sometimes even of women and gays) against Islamic obscurantism.

These arguments are very popular in the French media, far beyond the ranks of the National Front: many public intellectuals who do not want to be confused with Marine Le Pen have become her most effective allies, such as Alain Finkielkraut, who recently joined the Académie française. After the terrorist attacks of 2015, François Hollande and his prime minister Manuel Valls adopted policies suggested by the National Front: state of exception, curfew, mass expulsion of undocumented immigrants. They even tried to adopt the principle of depriving citizenship for binational terrorists (i.e., French citizens with North African origins).

NA MC

Do you give any credence at all to terms like “micro-fascism” or other concepts that see fascism as a transhistorical dynamic within capitalism?

ET

"Micro-fascism" seems an inappropriate definition since we are faced with a global phenomenon. Since an authentic democracy requires social equality, we can say that, especially in the neoliberal age, capitalism consists in "undoing" democracy, as Wendy Brown has explained so well. This is a general tendency of capitalism itself, not one of its pathologies or degenerated forms.

Since the first half of the nineteenth century, a classical liberal thinker like Tocqueville understood that the development of capitalism threatened what he considered the "elective affinity" between market society and democracy. This vision of an identity between capitalism and democracy became a myth in the second half of the twentieth century, in the age of the welfare state.

In fact, this "humanization" of capitalism was a consequence of the October Revolution. After the collapse of real socialism and the end of decolonization, capitalism rediscovered its "savage" nature. Social inequalities exploded on a global scale and democracy began to be emptied of its content.

Fascism certainly has a "transhistorical" character — think of the military dictatorships in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s — and cannot be disconnected from capitalism, which was one of its premises. But viewing fascism as a result of the global crisis of capitalism does not mean considering it as its inevitable outcome.

In the United States, the outcome of the crisis of capitalism was not fascism. It was the New Deal. Fascism belongs to a historical time — the twentieth century — in which it destroyed democracy. Today, post-fascism has lost the subversive dimension of its ancestors: it does not wish to suppress parliamentarism or individual rights; it rather tries to destroy democracy from the inside.

NA MC

You write about the contemporary "breaking of the taboo" around open assertions of fascist or ultraright political identities. You acknowledge that the European far right has achieved some legitimacy by filling the vacancy left by retreating social-democratic parties, yet you seem to be making a deeper point that touches on the idea of what you call a "regime of historicity." Can you expand on the connection you draw between our "amnesiac democracies" and the rise of the far right?

ET

Post-fascism is a global phenomenon that does not have monolithic or even homogeneous features. Its explosive cocktail of nationalism, xenophobia, racism, charismatic leadership, reactionary "identitarianism," and regressive anti-globalization politics can take different forms.

For instance, the radical form of neoliberalism endorsed by Bolsonaro is unknown in Europe, where post-fascism is fueled by anger and discontent with the neoliberal policies of the EU. From this point of view, it seems to me that a fundamental premise for the rise of post-fascism lies in the lack of a left-wing alternative to neoliberalism.

Both communism and social democracy, the hegemonic models of the Left in the twentieth century, have failed: real socialism collapsed, paralyzed by its own contradictions, and social democracy — the tool for the humanization of capitalism during the Cold War — exhausted its historical function when capitalism became neoliberal. Socialism has to be reinvented.

However, in the competition between the Left and the Right to reinvent itself, post-fascism is one length ahead. But differently from its ancestors, which were supported by the ruling classes of continental Europe in the 1930s, post-fascism has not yet become the main option of the neoliberal elites. It could become the main option following a general crisis of capitalism, or a sudden collapse of the EU. The fear of Bolshevism, the main source of fascism in the years between the two world

wars, no longer exists.

In my book, I speak of a neoliberal “regime of historicity” whose horizons are constrained by the present. This is a handicap for both right and left movements. Post-fascism does not have the utopian horizon of its ancestors. It does not try to conquer the collective imagination with the myth of a “New Man,” the “Millenary Reich,” and a new civilization. The logic of post-fascism is rather that of “cultural pessimism”: defense of traditional values and “threatened” national identities; claims for national sovereignty against globalization, and the search for a scapegoat in immigrants, refugees, and Muslims.

NA MC

The book is primarily concerned with Europe. Even your brief discussions of American politics are mostly to refute the idea that Trump can be understood through a fascist optics. Do you see any broader applicability for the general “regime of historicity” you’re describing? Doesn’t Bolsonaro’s victory in Brazil invite us to consider the global scale of the post-fascist phenomenon

ET

As many observers pointed out, Trump exhibits typical fascist features: authoritarian and charismatic leadership, hatred of democracy, contempt for law, exhibitions of force, scorn for human rights, open racism, misogyny, homophobia. But there is no fascist movement behind him. He was elected as the candidate of the Republican Party, which is a pillar of the American political establishment. This paradoxical situation cannot become permanent without putting into question the democratic framework of the United States.

A similar dilemma, in an even more dramatic and striking form, is at stake in Brazil after the election of Bolsonaro. He is more radical than his American or European counterparts: whereas Marine Le Pen broke with her father’s antisemitism and adopted a democratic rhetoric, Bolsonaro is an apologist of torture and military dictatorship. Whereas Marine Le Pen and Salvini wish to reinstate protectionist policies, Bolsonaro is a fanatical neoliberal.

However, Petrobras, the pillar of Brazilian capitalism, is not behind him. As many Brazilian analysts have pointed out, behind Bolsonaro there are three powerful conservative forces: “balas, bois, e biblia” — the army, landowners, and Evangelical fundamentalism.

NA MC

In other words, a true classical fascist movement would combine those two things that Trump and Bolsonaro are lacking: mass mobilization and the unified support of the elites. Is that correct?

ET

Yes, I think this is a major difference that distinguishes them from classical fascism, even if the ruling classes can perfectly accommodate both of them, especially in the absence of any effective alternative. In the EU countries, however, this option is not on their agenda. The militarized mass movements of classical fascism were a consequence of the brutalization of politics produced by the Great War. Today, this has occurred in Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, but not in the EU countries, the United States, or Brazil. This is why the forerunner of Trump and Bolsonaro is neither Mussolini nor Hitler, but Berlusconi. But a new, global crisis could change the profile of the far right in many countries.

NA MC

One of the more interesting sections of your new book involves a discussion of the

European school of “anti-fascist” historians and their purportedly “politically neutral” revision of history. Why do you see them as so dangerous and why would it be important to reassert the importance of an antifascist historiography?

ET

The dividing line between fascism and democracy is both moral and political. In continental Europe and, in more recent years, in Latin America, democracy was born from the Resistance and from antifascism. Wherever these struggles have brought forth democracy, an “anti-fascist” democracy would only be fragile, amnesic, and unfaithful to its own history.

The Left should remember this genetic link between antifascism and democracy. Democracy cannot be reduced to a juridical and political dispositive, to “the rules of the game.” Nor is democracy a simple corollary of market society; it is a historical conquest of political revolutions and antifascist struggle. Breaking or denying this historical link is the most direct way of “undoing the demos.”

NA MC

You’ve described the recent “square movements” like Occupy Wall Street and the Spanish *Indignados* as an attempt to invent a “new communism.” At the same time, you seem to suggest that without critically revisiting “old communism” and discovering some usable aspects of that legacy, the global left will remain rudderless. Where are some of those usable aspects of the communist legacy?

ET

Occupy Wall Street and Spain’s *Indignados* have expressed a desire for an alternative, as has Syriza in Greece before its political shift in the summer 2015. Today, Bernie Sanders, Jeremy Corbyn, and Podemos prove that the Left is looking for new ideas, new paths, and new hopes. Sanders embodies a shift in the history of the American left, after the New Deal in the 1930s and the New Left in the 1960s. He gives a new legitimacy to the idea of socialism in a country where it was never hegemonic. In the UK and Spain, Corbyn and Podemos symbolize a radical break with the long sequence of social-liberalism.

These experiences are steps towards inventing a new model for a global left. The old paradigms failed but have not been replaced yet. A new model should combine a critical interpretation of the world and a project for its revolutionary transformation, as Marx suggested in his famous “eleventh thesis .”

Communism embodied this combination and established the utopian horizon for the twentieth century. My only certainty is that a new, alternative left for the twenty-first century will be anticapitalist, but I do not know whether it will call itself “communist.” It will probably invent new concepts and images — like socialism and communism did in the past two centuries. But a new global left will not be invented tabula rasa. Saying that a historical break took place with past models does not mean that a global left would not need memory and a historical consciousness.

A critical understanding of past defeats is unavoidable. What helped the Left to overcome its defeats, from the Paris Commune to the 1973 Chilean coup, was the conviction that the future belonged to socialism, and even the most tragic failures were only lost battles. This belief in a historical goal was burdened by a teleological dimension, but it also gave the Left an extraordinary strength, which today no longer exists.

The Left has been “orphaned.” It can neither claim nor forget the past — it has to overcome it.

NA MC

You seem skeptical of populism's political use for the Left. Since it's a word often used at cross-purposes — to lump together disparate phenomenon like La France Insoumise and the National Front — you suggest that populism ends up blurring the lines between the Left and the Right. That certain left intellectuals and political parties have embraced the tag "left-populism," attempting to chart a course between "the square" and the "polls", doesn't seem to enter into your considerations. Do you think there is any place for a left-populism in the fight against post-fascism?

ET

In my view, populism is a political style that can be shared by leaders of different and even opposing orientations on both the Right and Left of the political spectrum. But a style and rhetoric where virtue is embodied by the "people" opposed to the corrupted elites simply define the form, not the content of a political force. In Latin America, left-wing populism used demagoguery and often took on authoritarian features, but its goal was to include the lower classes into the social and political system. In Western Europe, right-wing populism is xenophobic, racist, and claims policies of exclusion.

As Marco D'Eramo has stressed, in most cases, stigmatizing "populism" reveals an aristocratic and elitist contempt for the "people." If populism means that Corbyn, Sanders, and Podemos are interchangeable with Salvini, Orban, Trump, and Bolsonaro, it is a completely useless or even dangerous concept.

I know that some radical thinkers think of populism as an alternative to a supposedly obsolete cleavage between left and right, and often they put forward valuable arguments. Under certain circumstances this use of populism can work, but in a global context of rising post-fascist movements, it risks generating dangerous misunderstandings.

NA MC

In closing, we wanted to ask you about the recent controversy surrounding the so-called "left case for closed borders," which has raised a number of questions about sovereignty and its political use as a concept for the Left. Do you have any thoughts on the matter?

ET

Claiming "closed borders" in the age of "walled states" and militarized frontiers against immigrants and refugees seems extremely dangerous to me. It ultimately legitimizes xenophobia, reactionary defenses of "national identity," and a return to national sovereignty — the refrain of post-fascism. Thinking that capitalist globalization could be counteracted by reestablishing national borders is a regressive idea, insofar as all the crucial issues of the twenty-first century, from ecology to social inequalities and demographic transfers, require a global solution.

Since its origins, internationalism belongs to the Left, and I do not think that we could easily abandon or reject universalism. In a global age, socialism should rediscover the original meaning of borders as meeting points rather than lines of separation.

INTERVIEW BY Nicolas Allen & Martín Cortés

P.S.

- Jacobin, 02.04.2019:

<https://jacobinmag.com/2019/02/enzo-traverso-post-fascism-ideology-conservatism>

- ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Enzo Traverso teaches at Cornell University. His most recent book is *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory*.

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Footnotes

- [1] <https://www.versobooks.com/books/2876-the-new-faces-of-fascism>