

## Introduction: New Faces of Authoritarianism

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## Asad HAIDER and Massimiliano TOMBA

### Introduction: New Faces of Authoritarianism

In recent years we have witnessed the transformation of a growing number of states in an authoritarian direction. This change has taken place not always through coups or civil wars, but through normal democratic electoral mechanisms and constitutional changes. Viktor Orban, who is currently leading Hungary away from the rule of law, has expressed his vision for Hungary as an "illiberal democracy." This path is no different from that undertaken by Russia, Turkey, Poland, the Czech Republic, Austria, Italy, India, Brazil—and the list could go on. In the United States, which has always presented itself as the exemplary democracy, there has been widespread debate over whether such processes are also taking place. They heightened to a fever pitch when Trumpism took the form of the assault on the Capitol on January 6, 2021. Predictions of a coup turned out to be premature; the extreme right was faced with a publicity problem, and for the first time Trump said he was prepared to engage in a "a smooth, orderly and seamless transition of power"—which has since taken place. Yet it is impossible to predict what new phenomena we will observe in the future development of American politics, since Trumpism itself arose after eight years of democratic stability—the "normalcy" which is promised by the new administration.

In 2018, *The Economist* published an article on the state of democracy in the contemporary world: "Democracy continues its disturbing retreat. More than half the countries in the latest update of a democratic-health index saw their scores decline." Far from representing the erosion of the state, neoliberal policies have given rise to a reconfiguration of the state's functions. The state survives by strengthening the primordial functions of sovereignty: control, security, borders. There is a common interpretation of these phenomena which attributes the cause of this authoritarian turning point to right-wing populism, often defined as a sort of "shadow of modern representative democracy" or a danger and a disfiguration of democracy (Müller 11; Urbinati 215). Alternatively, populism has also been seen as a reaction to neoliberalism and the possibility, for a Left populism, to "recover and deepen democracy" (Mouffe 5). Although this second vision holds open political possibilities that are blocked in the first vision, there is something they have in common: in both cases there is no discussion of the democratic form as such, but only of its disfiguration or intensification. It is as if democracy were an unquestionable concept.

Once again, the exemplary democracy provides an apt illustration. Opponents of Trump across the political spectrum widely debated the question of whether Trumpism constituted a form of fascism. Such debates often foundered on the problem of definitions, the status of historical analogies, and empirical uncertainties. The conditions of the contemporary United States are very different from those of interwar Europe, and at the level of historical analogy the debate often comes down to whether a term like fascism can be generalized outside of its historically specific context, a question more philosophical than empirical. Productive avenues of investigation can provide a conceptual, rather than analogical basis for certain delimited generalizations—fascism's emphasis on national and racial identity, its nihilistic will to destruction, its manifestation in moments of mass acclamation, its foundational negation of emancipatory politics.

But part of what is lost in these debates is an understanding of the specificity of the American extreme right, which, in contrast to the disciplined and militarist collectivism of historical fascists, is based on a uniquely American individualism, revolving around the Constitutional foundations of the right to property and the right to bear arms, a suspicion of "big government," and the historical absence of mass revolutionary organizations. The discourse which portrays Trumpism as fascism can lead to portraying it as a foreign and anachronistic exception, rather than understanding how the American extreme right is deeply embedded in the institutions, ideologies, and cultures of American democracy. It is for this reason that we see great value in deploying the broad category of authoritarianism as a phenomenon that is internal to contemporary democratic institutions.

Global institutional developments, and the disordered expressions of anger and contradictory symbols which accompany them, are not destined to disappear in the short term. They are symptoms of ongoing processes of crisis, and a transition whose outcomes are uncertain. It is an economic, political, social, and media transition, but also one which is framed by the pandemic crisis, accelerating ecological disaster, and unprecedented income inequality. The desire for a return to normalcy, understandable thought it may be, ends up becoming a desire to return to the very conditions which have generated the crisis.

If globalization processes have increased complexity together with political and economic instability, new simplifications are particularly attractive. If the social cement that should hold society together

crumbles, new identity mechanisms emerge, and with them, new and old enemies are promptly invented, identified, and stigmatized. If political and economic decision-making processes are increasingly impersonal and distant from the population, a charismatic leader's person to be acclaimed in real or virtual squares can present itself as an effective compensation. The democratic structure has become a complicated labyrinth of procedures in which decisions seem to be made in very distant places and have nothing to do with the real country and the needs of the population. The authoritarian simplification seems to be much more attractive than the proposal to implement democracy by adding new procedures to the already complicated Kafkaesque castle.

This situation calls for producing both new theories of authoritarianism and democratic practices which are able to grasp our historical moment. It will require rereading history, revisiting previous theorizations, and studying the current conjuncture. The articles published in this issue on authoritarianism try to address the rise of new forms of authoritarianism from these and other angles.

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