

Trumpism, Zumaism, and the fascist potential of authoritarian populism

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Abstract

The similarities between Donald Trump and Jacob Zuma, both authoritarian populist leaders, are striking in that they come from differing political trajectories: respectively, from deep reactionary currents and from a radical national liberation movement. This contrast points to the diverse origins of contemporary forms of authoritarian populism. Scholars have rightly identified the important differences between the fascism of the Hitler and Mussolini era and the authoritarian populisms of the years after the Second World War, of which the apartheid-era National Party may be considered an example. However, the article suggests, the radicalization of authoritarian populism internationally is producing a potential slide to something approaching classical fascism. In the US, this danger is ominously threatening, whereas in South Africa the partial defeat of Jacob Zuma, reflecting real strengths in civil society and institutions, seems to have arrested this process.

Keywords: Trump; Zuma; authoritarian populism; fascism

Jacob Zuma and Donald Trump are personally remarkably alike, at a superficial level – the bombastic rhetoric, the larger-than-life physicality, the sleazy sexual histories,¹ and the grandiose self-presentation. Much more substantively, in their style of government they also resemble each other in striking ways (as others in this issue have also pointed out) – the message that only the great leader with a unique and direct connection to the people could solve the nation’s problems; their ability to convince their followers that they represent the ordinary person against distant elites; their hollowing out of the state by the appointment of incompetent cronies and the destruction of legal norms; and their history of involvement with criminal networks.² Both can be regarded as instances of “authoritarian populist” rule. Yet it is extraordinary from what different political histories they emerged. Trump portrays even the palest shade of liberalism as the “socialist” or “antifa” enemy, is the son of a supporter of the Klu Klux Klan, believes in eugenics, and has a long record of not-so-subliminal racism.³ In Trump’s racial discourse, oppositional black politicians are all “low IQ,”⁴ and the achievements of African Americans are denied by the apparent appeal for support of “What do you have to lose?”⁵ Zuma on the other hand comes from a deep tradition of heroic, egalitarian, and militant anti-racist struggle, in a movement largely shaped by the left.

I realize, as I write this, that I feel deep unease I felt in comparing these two leaders. The background from which Zuma comes represents much that I identify with; Trump’s all that I detest. But recent authoritarian populist regimes come out of an extraordinary range of histories, yet largely end up in the same place. The rightist media mogul Berlusconi, the former KGB officer Putin, the sometime Communist youth organizer Orban, the

“swayamsevak” of the fascist-religious chauvinist RSS, Modi, the opportunist gangster-politician Duterte, the representative of provincial Muslim religiosity, Erdogan, all ultimately evolved in a similar direction. There is no one path to authoritarian populism. So for all my admiration of many aspects of the ANC’s past, I have in all honesty to say that there is little to distinguish Jacob Zuma from this sordid company. Only Zuma’s defeat – the result of his own political incompetence, the strength of South African civil society, and the presence of more democratic-minded elements within the government – saved South Africa from the political fate of India, Hungary, Turkey, Russia and the Philippines, states where a superficial dressing of multi-party structures and legalism hides a near-dictatorship.

Of course, what all these forms of authoritarian populist politics have in common is an extreme form of nationalism. Nationalism first arose, in the early modern era, as part of a radical ideology, in the era of the American and French Revolutions. The idea of belonging to the nation was linked to that of citizenship (and often to the idea of bearing arms in the national defense). But in Europe especially, it hypertrophied into chauvinism and rationalizations of Empire. This was worsened toward the end of the nineteenth century with its imbrication with biological discourses of race and nation. In the colonized world, radicals have been inclined to cut nationalism a lot of slack, seeing it as the vehicle of anti-colonialism and egalitarian change. But in the era of decolonization, the “pitfalls of national consciousness” of which Fanon warned, became all too apparent.⁶ The myths of a nation unified against an external power have been used, all too often, by dominant internal elites in the maintenance of inequality. And state socialisms have also had their very strong nationalisms underpinning authoritarianism, all at one level, variants on the theme of Stalin’s “Socialism in one country.” South Africa’s key historical nationalisms represent the melding of strains in this history. The loyalism of British emigrant South Africans and their descendants served to justify empire. Afrikaner nationalism had strong anti-colonial components within it, in its opposition to the British empire and dominant Anglo- South African elite, but also became the underpinning, in apartheid, of the world’s most elaborated system of racial domination. The form of politics which Zuma represents, comes out of a liberatory tradition, but represents its transformation into the pursuit of the interests of a new elite under the nationalist banner. It also borrows many practices from the Soviet model of the ANC’s Cold War allies – from which Zuma’s ANC kept the centralism while abandoning the socialism. The lesson then seems to be that nationalism can equally serve the purposes of authoritarian regimes emerging both from imperialist histories and from histories of anti-colonial struggle and state socialism. Ultra-nationalist populisms look much the same, whatever their background.

Even more painful, in thinking about what has happened in the Zuma era in South Africa, what is happening in these other nations, and what could now happen in the US, is a question which hovers in my mind about the possibility that authoritarian populism can turn to something resembling the classical fascism of the 1920s and 1930s. Scholars of contemporary right-wing populism have correctly been anxious to differentiate between it and the regimes of Hitler, Mussolini, and their lesser emulators between the world wars. This takes us into the fiendishly complex issue of how fascism and populism might be defined and differentiated from one another, issues dealt with in an impossibly vast historical literature. Suffice it to say here that there do seem to be certain core ideological themes that appear in all extreme right movements: the “need” for strong leadership, xenophobia and racism, hostility to organized labor, resistance to gender equality, the dream of a past golden age threatened by modernist degeneracy, the notion of the good rural people versus the corrupt urban world. These are generally shared by both the fascism of 1919–1945 and by more

recent authoritarian populisms. I would suggest, however, that in classical fascism these notions combined with a virtual abolition of civil society institutions, enforced with massive military and police violence. A single party, and the breaking down of the any distinction between Party and state is a virtual requirement of classical fascism, but not of populist regimes, which usually allow some form of opposition, albeit constrained. Both though share a complex relation to capitalism. Big business was attracted to the support of historical fascism, as it is to modern populisms, by the prospect of reductions of social spending and anti-labor movement measures. Both have a tendency though to get beyond the control of their sponsors, sometimes with disastrous results, and the potential for this to happen is probably greater with fascism than populism, because of the centrality of the single, organized party in fascism.

There are good historical reasons for the differences between historical and contemporary forms of right-wing extremism. As Federico Finchelstein has argued, the fascist project was discredited by Nazism and the historical watershed of its defeat meant that new, sanitized, types of political projects had to be developed if the extreme right was to succeed.⁷ For at least the three decades after the end of the Second World War, the ideological impact of the struggle against Fascism had a chilling effect on the success of far right politics. There was something of an elevation of the right-wing extremist level of assertiveness in the penumbra of the “free market” ideological revolution of the 1980s, with its anti-statist and individualist themes. But even though, since the late 1970s, we have seen the rise of powerful movements of the right that repackage some of the key themes of classical fascism, they have, until recently, done so in a relatively subtle way. Old tropes reappeared, at first in forms adapted to contemporary sensibilities. This is why the idea of the “dog-whistle” is a key term in contemporary political discourse; the full force of these positions must be strong enough to rally hard-core supporters, but soft enough to be deniable to centrist opinion. Importantly, opposition parties are undermined and demonized rather than banned, the judicial system is weakened by authoritarian legislation, partisan judicial appointments and selective prosecution, rather than overtly subordinated to the ruling party, and civil society movements are gradually squeezed into insignificance rather than being prohibited. These are real differences from classical fascism, and this permits some real scope for oppositional politics even if such activity becomes difficult and dangerous. However, the evolution of the politics of these strong-man regimes raises a chilling question: as their grip gradually tightens, and space for opposition declines, is there a point at which the distinction between authoritarian populism and fascism ceases?

Two notable recent features of contemporary far-right politics have been the internationalization of its thinking and activities, and a break-down of clear distinctions between respectable rightists and the ultra-right fringe. Globally, there has been an increasing ideological traffic in the racist themes of the far right. The idea of the “Great Replacement” (of whites by immigrants) started off in France, but was circulated internationally by the likes of Steve Bannon. The post-9/11 War on Terror helped to license the idea of a new crusade against Muslims, linking far-rightists in North America, Europe and Australasia. There is a complex connection between the apparently “fringe” world of neo-Nazis, militias, extreme right talk show hosts, and conspiracy theories, and “mainstream” politics. The “lunatic” elements and conventional politicians can see each other as serving their own ends. In the case of the US, incidents like the protests of armed hard-core groups like the “Threepencers” are treated by many Republican politicians as representing the excusable rage of ordinary folk against overreaching centralization and used by them to dramatize issues. For example, during the Obama years, far-right occupations of government land and

federal conservation facilities were manipulated to serve GOP demands for privatization and calls for repeal of environmental legislation. It is also clear that there is a knowing attempt by some within the Trump administration to cater to the far right through the use of historical references and imagery with a neo-fascist tinge. Thus the fantasies of the QAnon cult are retweeted on political representatives' twitter,⁸ the site of a historic massacre of African Americans (Tulsa) is chosen for a Trump rally, and the current presidential campaign logo looks to many like the Nazi eagle.⁹ Of course, it is true that many of the politicians pandering to the ultra-right are not true believers. Their real interest is in obtaining a clear field for unregulated free market capitalism and installing rightist judges who can demolish any future attempts to regulate it. They believe that they are using the neo-fascist fringe and ideologues like Steve Bannon and Stephen Miller. But like some of the wealthy sponsors of historic fascists, they may well find it was they themselves who were being used.

The notion that fascism, on a global scale, might return in my lifetime was not something that I had seriously contemplated until the last few months. The idea that fascists were on the losing side of history was deeply ingrained in my political formation, even when I was very young. And I realize that this is because I am very much a product of a post-Second World War World childhood. My father and most his contemporaries in the social circle that I grew up in in Johannesburg had been in the 1939–45 war. My mother's brother and my father's uncle had both been killed in combat. The stories and legends of the conflict were what I grew up with. A couple who were amongst our closest family friends were a larger-than-life former RAF bomber pilot and his wife, who survived the Blitz in London. Nazism was thus the imagined historic enemy in our social world of British loyalists, dismayed by South Africa's departure from the Commonwealth. That background was central to my life-long fascination with the historical question of fascism. But it also shaped my perception of South Africa. My parents' generation of Anglo South Africans' view of Afrikaner nationalism was also formed by wartime history. The fact that many of the leaders of the National Party regime, including Prime Minister B. J. Vorster, had been members of the pro-German *Ossewa Brandwag* and that the NP itself had refused to support the Allied war effort, crucially shaped their perception of the ruling party. In the war years the antagonism had been fierce. My mother had stories of my uncle and his Airforce friends going into central Johannesburg and getting into fights with the OB. Even my grandmother, according to family legend, prodded with her umbrella OB members who would not stand for *God Save the King* when it was played at the cinema. So, in our world, the authoritarian acts of the NP in government were frequently characterized as being Nazi-like, and there were frequent references to the past of figures like B.J. Vorster.

Of course, though, there was a major contradiction in all this. Though there was a visceral distaste for Nazism and its crimes, a real legacy of the war experience, the racial politics of our world, was to say the least, ambiguous. During the war years, many white servicemen and their families at home, were influenced by ideas of social and racial reform, and by "anti-fascist" thinking propagated by the Army Education Service, left-wing members of the South African Labour Party, and by the Communist-led servicemen's organization, the Springbok Legion. After the war, there was another expression of this political sentiment in the early 1950s in the mobilization of the Torch Commando, an ex-servicemen's group opposing the reactionary amendments to the Constitution being pursued by the government. However, as Neil Roos has shown, while white soldiers and ex-soldiers were often supportive of benevolent and paternalistic social and racial reform from above, they were never really able to contemplate the possibility of the whites abandoning their monopoly of social power.¹⁰

Thus, while the politics of anti-fascism had a real impact on a sector of white society, it foundered on the rock of racial power.

From an analytical point of view, it would in reality certainly be wrong to view apartheid as a form of fascism. The National Party was a racial populist party rather than a fascist one. D. F. Malan's leadership was founded on his political defeat of the overtly fascist OB. While the apartheid regime was incredibly brutal, it had elements of the continuity of civil society – in the judiciary, press, universities, the existence of some legal dissenting parties, movements and trade unions, albeit limited and harassed – that are not to be found in classical fascism. These differences were to be very important to the possibility of the emergence of the struggles of mass opposition movements in the 1950s and again in the 1970s and 1980s. The apartheid state was a state with some fascists in it, but it was not a fascist state. However, it is highly understandable that many both at home and internationally did see apartheid as the continuation of Nazism. A handful of veterans, shaped and equipped by their wartime experiences, were at the forefront of the formation of MK. A number of them were Jewish, and the antisemitic history of the OB and 1930s/1940s Malanite NP made them particularly likely to be aware of connections to Nazism. Though Verwoerd was careful not to make biological racism part of the apartheid program, the perception of the imposition of a vast bureaucratized system of racial inequality as a Nazi-like project was crucial to the moral appeal of the global anti-apartheid movement. And in the ANC's rhetoric, as well as that of its Soviet-bloc and Cuban allies, the Pretoria regime was denounced as fascist, even though this characterization sometimes sat uneasily alongside the ANC/Communist Party theory that South Africa constituted a "Colonialism of a Special Type."

The realization that there was a huge logical contradiction in the world that I grew up in between the condemnation of Nazism and the acceptance of South Africa's racial inequality was crucial to my personal trajectory, and especially to my determination not to serve in the SADF. As a student in the UK in the 1970s, I studied Nazism with the great Marxist historian Tim Mason, and I enthusiastically participated in demonstrations against the neo-Nazi National Front. For me, the question of whether South Africa could be understood through comparison with classical fascism thus became a long-term obsession, even though I ultimately concluded that classical fascism and apartheid were fundamentally divergent. Back in South Africa, as a young academic, I wrote about macro-historical comparisons of South Africa with Germany, my studies of German history did definitely influence some of what I saw in Afrikaner nationalism, and I was especially concerned to highlight the real dangers posed to a transition in the country in the 1980s and early 1990s by openly fascist groups like the Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging (AWB).

But I never thought until recently that the question of fascism would return to the agenda as a possible future in the major countries of the world, or in liberated South Africa. I have had to revise that opinion. Last semester, I offered my American students a course on "Fascism and Right-Wing Extremism." We explored both historical fascism and contemporary right-wing populism. I started off by emphasizing the massive differences between the pre- and post-1945 periods, and the distinctiveness of the two phenomena. Yet as our discussions went on, I was more and more struck by the convergences of the present with the past. Modi's attacks on Muslims and on the left, Orban's consolidation of power in his own hands, Erdogan's brutal wars and Bolsanaro's exterminationist policies toward indigenous people and Putin's crushing of NGOs, journalists and political oppositionists, all take major states steps nearer to fascism. And we now face the determination of Trump and his theocrat henchman Bill Barr to avoid yielding power, generating an ever more extreme rightward politics. This opens the

hair-raising prospect that Trump might lose the upcoming election, but refuse to accept the results, opening the way for an unprecedented constitutional crisis.

In this perspective, in retrospect, the Ramaphosa faction's defeat of Zuma looks more and more like a narrow escape from a possible fascistic, if not exactly fascist, future. The decade or so of Jacob Zuma's dominance in South African politics represented a long and deeply depressing moment of retrogression in South Africa. For all the critiques that could be made of Mandela's conciliationism and Mbeki's disastrous handling of the AIDS crisis, of ANC economic policy and the shenanigans of the Arms Deal, South Africa had extraordinary achievements to its credit in the first fifteen years after democratization. A disintegrative civil war was avoided; an exemplary and socially innovative constitutional structure was capped by a widely respected constitutional court; competent management was imposed in at least some key departments of the central state; there was a massive improvement in living standards and opportunities for a substantial black middle class and upper working class (even if many were left behind or marginalized); a thriving civil society continued and fair elections were held. All this was notable social and democratic progress. The Zuma years threatened to reverse these gains. Zuma had no coherent policy goals, no interest in building an effective modern state, and no social and political vision.¹¹ The state and the parastatal organizations and companies it controlled, became entities to be looted by him and his cronies. The operation of the state was linked to criminal enterprises – most importantly that of the Gupta clan, but also a range of local and global mafias. Law enforcement was selectively directed to the government's purposes. Zuma's instincts were all authoritarian, and if South African democracy did not fail, it was because of the strength of its civil society and legal culture – as well as the more democratically minded elements in the ANC and the opposition parties – and not because of any lack of interest on Zuma's part in imposing an undemocratic rule. Cyril Ramaphosa's victory was a sorely needed turn away from this trajectory. Though it is, of course, possible to criticize Ramaphosa's leadership, he has done a considerable amount to right the ship, in a difficult situation where half of his party hankers after the days of Zuma. And his handling of at least the early stages of the Coronavirus crisis has been statesmanlike. But the struggle is not over. Zuma remains a threatening presence in the background, and his covert alliance with the EFF, a party with its own fascist tinge of blood and soil, suggests the dangers of a future swing back to an apparently “revolutionary,” but actually right-populist, and even quasi-fascist regime.

I realize in retrospect that I have been deeply attached to historical narrative of progress. While my political views have changed in various ways across time, I assumed from the when I was young, that though there might be setbacks, through political struggles, the world would evolve toward greater egalitarianism. Yet now we find ourselves teetering on the brink of a new global age of fascism. There is in reality no guarantee that the Martin Luther King's Hegelian assumption that the long arc of history bends toward justice is valid. Rosa Luxemburg's counter-position of the choice between “Socialism or Barbarism” seems more apposite, except the latter seems more likely than the former. It is difficult not to conclude, as Max Weber did at the end of the First World War, that “no Summer's bloom lies ahead of us, but a polar night of icy darkness and hardness.”¹² Yet in a sense South Africa's defeat of Zuma offers some hope. The slide into authoritarianism and potential fascism is not irreversible. The massive and internationalist movement of solidarity against racism and repression of the present moment presents a window on the possibility of a different future. But what we do with that vision, is up to us. It is not yet clear whether the date today is 1945 or 1933.

Notes

1 Thamm, “Khwezi, The Woman who Accused Jacob Zuma of Rape Dies” online; Osborne, “It Felt Like Tentacles,” online.

2 On “hollowing out”, in relation to Zuma see Editorial, “The Hollow State”; and in relation to Trump, Boot, “Trump is Deconstructing the Government, One Agency at a Time.” On criminality see, for Trump, Johnston, “Just What were Trump’s Ties to the Mob?”; Unger, “Trump’s Russian Laundromat”; for Zuma, see; “Zuma’s Deal with Cape Gang Bosses”; Mahajan, “‘State Capture’: How the Gupta Brothers Hijacked South Africa Using Bribes Instead of Bullets.”

3 Mortimer, “Trump Believes he has Superior Genes, Biographer Claims”; Rubin, “Trump’s Racist Housing Tweet is Par for his Family.”

4 Rascoe, “Low IQ”, “Spectacular”, “Dog”: How Trump Tweets about African-Americans.”

5 Smith, “What We All had to Lose.”

6 Finchelstein, *From Fascism to Populism in History*.

7 Ibid.

8 Rosenberg and Haberman, “The Republican Embrace of Qanon goes far Beyond Trump.”

9 Cole, “Trump Campaign T-Shirts Condemned for Displaying ‘Nazi-Inspired’ Symbol.”

10 Roos, *Ordinary Springboks*.

11 Arun, “State Capture: Zuma, the Guptas, and the Sale of South Africa”; Gevisser, “State Capture: The Corruption Investigation the has Shaken South Africa.”

12 Weber, From *Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, 128.

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