

BOOK REVIEW

Mussolini and the Rise of Populism: The Man Who Made Fascism

by Spencer Di Scala, Abingdon, Routledge, 2023, 286 pp., £104.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-032-49831-7.

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The novelty of this book stems from its contribution to the increasing connection that is being made by analysts between Fascism and populism, an interaction which deserves further examination. With regard, in particular, to Federico Finchelstein's recent works, it is clear that an innovative trend of studies about the link between Fascism and populism is rapidly developing, and one of the important contributions of this work is using history (and showing the usefulness of history) to understand the current political climate. For example, in his introduction Di Scala states: 'The current populist wave can be better defined as "rightist" populism, which is nationalistic and exploits anger at the establishment' (p. 3).

This sentence brings us to a set of crucial considerations. Populism is emerging as the new wave of global politics in the twenty-first century, while fascism, polarising itself and antifascism in the struggle between authoritarianism (and/or dictatorship) and democracy, characterised world-wide politics in the twentieth century. At the time, fascism looked like a dynamic transnational movement embodying indigenous needs and issues. Fascism and all the various forms of authoritarianism (or dictatorship) presented themselves as efficient answers to the problems of their times. In this regard, fascism is often invoked in relation to populism. However, populism as a political strategy is an older and broader phenomenon than fascist ideology. Populist strategies seek popular resentment against the order imposed on society by a long-established ruling class (i.e. the establishment, the elite, the ruling caste), which is believed to monopolise power.

According to Di Scala, 'This attitude exploiting people's resentment and nationalistic feelings is a characteristic of populist authoritarian personages. We can see something similar in the policies of Donald Trump, Viktor Orbán, and Recep Erdogan ...' (p. 156). In these terms, the author implicitly demonstrates how Italian fascism stood on a range of contradictions. For example, he shows how Mussolini's populism emerged as an efficient combination of both leftist and rightist issues (i.e. class action and nationalism). His regime made gigantic efforts to convince Italians that the Fascist regime was 'working for the people', acting in the name of the people, and fighting against the 'privileged class' in the name of the oppressed people.

Nevertheless, Di Scala also warns readers that: 'in conflating populism and Fascism, and consistently comparing Trump to the Duce, journalists and commentators had little idea

of what Mussolini's Fascism was, or why populism might have been similar to it' (p. 202). In other words, many commentators had little idea of what *historical* fascism was and, above all, they showed a lack of knowledge about Mussolini and populism. For instance, Fascism in Italy never became a clearly articulated system of belief because ideas were instrumentalised for Mussolini's populist, short-term political goals. To demonstrate this, in the first part of the book (chapters 1–11), Di Scala provides a brilliant description of the historical background that characterised Mussolini's political career and the consolidation of his regime. The author accurately depicts Mussolini's early life as well as his rise to power through the Red Biennium, the March on Rome and the Matteotti crisis. In addition, Di Scala identifies some crucial factors of Mussolini's foreign policy, such as the 'third way', the 'myth' of Rome, the revisionist attitude against the Versailles treaty, imperialism, and the development of the Axis.

In the second part (chapters 12–14), the book examines some crucial concepts of the postfascist era, namely the development of neofascist movements, their participation in Italy's political system, and the 'insertion policy' (a gradual process of collaboration with and inclusion in the democratic republican system). Moreover, it stresses some secondary (but still important) aspects of the neofascist galaxy, such as mysticism. Finally, it offers a very interesting analysis of Trump's relationship with far-right groups in the wider range of a global – although heterogeneous – network, which includes the Lega Nord, Casa Pound and Fratelli d'Italia.

In practical terms, Di Scala's work is a perceptive, unusual, and user-friendly handbook on the history of Italian fascism, as well as a helpful introduction to Italy's modern history, particularly for sceptical but curious beginners. In this regard, the book shifts from a detailed historical analysis to a deeper political examination of today's issues. Unfortunately, the analysis of the dichotomy fascism-populism emerges only in the last two chapters. A deeper exploration of the populist aspects in the history of the Fascist regime would have been helpful.

Mussolini and the Rise of Populism deals with today's issues of democracy, governance, and equality. As the author states in the introduction: 'The possibility of a Fascist return depends on conditions and how it is confronted by the democracies' (p. 3). In this context, whether Fascism still exists or not is debatable. Certainly, today there is a lack of democracy which can facilitate the success of new far-right movements, and Di Scala's book can help to take these phenomena more seriously than before.