



Transcription

Democracy in Question? – Season 2, Episode 10

**Is “fascism” a useful concept to analyze the pathologies of US politics,
past and present?**

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Published 26 August 2021

Democracy in Question? is the podcast series of the Albert Hirschman Center on Democracy at the Graduate Institute, Geneva, the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM), Vienna, and the Excellence Chair, University of Bremen (Research Group: Soft Authoritarianism).

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SR: Welcome to "Democracy in Question." The podcast series that explores the challenges democracies around the world are facing today. I'm Shalini Randeria the director of the Albert Hirschman Centre on Democracy at the Graduate Institute in Geneva and the rector of the Institute for Human Sciences here in Vienna.

We are closing this season of "Democracy in Question?" with Professor Jason Stanley. Jason is professor of philosophy at Yale University. He's written extensively on free speech, mass incarceration, democracy, authoritarianism. I would like to just mention two of his books, which we will be talking about today, "How Propaganda Works" and more recently, "How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them." So, I'm delighted to have you here with me.

JS: Thank you very much. It's incredible to be in conversation with you and honor.

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SR: Over these two seasons of "Democracy in Question," we've clearly identified the alarming rise of right-wing populist leaders, all of them elected with large majorities in well-established democracies. So, Donald Trump, Bolsonaro in Brazil, in Hungary, Viktor Orbán, in Turkey, Erdoğan. You prefer to use the term fascism rather than authoritarianism or populism for this new form of rule. So today, we're going to look at whether we should call the U.S. fascist. But I also want to discuss with you how the European ideology of fascism of the 1920s has seeped into democracies all over the world from India to Brazil.

Let me begin on a personal note, Jason. Questions of fascism and totalitarianism are far from merely academic issues for you. You begin your book, "How Fascism Works," with your father's escape from Nazi Germany and his arrival in the United States. So, could you tell us how this family experience has shaped your recent writings and your interest as a philosopher?

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JS: So, my father grew up in Berlin and was almost seven, a little bit older than my youngest child when he came to the United States and my mother lived through the war in Russia and Eastern Poland. And she and her sister were the only survivors in their generation. She lost eight or nine aunts and uncles. And this history deeply informs my upbringing. The importance of language was something that my parents always talked about. My father remembers learning to read and seeing the things that were written about him, Jewish people, on the streets of Berlin and newspapers, how the political leaders spoke of Jewish people. That sense of what happens in politics when you start to vilify minorities is something I grew up with.

My mother was eight when she left Poland in 1948. And she worked as a court sonographer in the criminal courts in Upstate New York, and then in Manhattan for 33 years.

[00:03:00] So, she experienced the rise of mass incarceration. She experienced the worst of mass incarceration. She saw firsthand how the courts were dealing with Black Americans, and it clearly reminded her of what she experienced in Poland. And that's how my mother raised me. My mother

raised me with the knowledge that in America, Black people are the target of the state. Black people are the target of the politics. And I should be lucky.

[00:03:30] And my father, while my father was a sociologist whose dissertation was on British imperialism. And so, I grew up with theoretical constructs of fascism that enabled me to interpret my own country as well.

SR: You begin "How Fascism Works" with the assertion that all fascist politics have their genesis in the past, especially in mythical pasts. This is the invocation of an allegedly pure era in the history of a country that was tragically destroyed, usually by forces external to it. The Hindu right in India places this glorious past in the ancient so-called Hindu-India, Orbán sees Hungary as the defender of Christendom. For the United States, such an appeal to earlier greatness was symbolized, for example, most recently in Trump's slogan of "Making America great again," but the question for me is beyond a broad anti-immigrant narrative, how are we to understand this kind of instrumentalization of history to create a mythical American golden age, which is part of the rhetorical strategy of the American right?

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JS: Around the world the idea is that patriarchal family structures are under threat. And the dominant group is under threat. In America, that dominant group are whites. The American narrative has been continually a story about keeping whites on the top. So, the mythical rhetorical golden age is the time at which all the television shows were about white people with white picket fences living in big houses, where the cultural center and the powerful politicians were white. It's very recent that we had Black politicians. There

were Black politicians in the reconstruction era, the era right after the civil war between 1865 and 1876, roughly, when Black Americans in the south were allowed to vote and their vote was protected by the federal government. #

[00:05:30] But the other Black politicians have come only since the civil rights era. So, Barack Obama was a real shock to the American system. It was a real meltdown moment for much of America, and I think, "Make America Great Again," means to a large extent going back to a time when white Americans clearly had the political power, were at the cultural center, dominated the narrative. And men, we can't forget about patriarchy.

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SR: So, let's focus a little more specifically on the 1920s and '30s because this is the "America First" movement birth period. Could you talk a little bit about this period in U.S. history and try and link it to the slogans and strategies of Trumpism more particularly today?

JS: So, you had many different fascist movements in the United States in the interwar period. The "America First" movement was sort of actually the least obviously fascist because you had some people who were just against war and wanted to stay out of war. So, it was a broad coalition, but we know that Charles Lindbergh, their spokesperson was a confidant of Nazis and was viewed by national socialists as a potential American dictator. We had the German-American Bund, which we know that Trump's father, Fred Trump was...well, we strongly suspect, or we know that he was in the German-American Bund. The German-American Bund was very explicitly pro-Nazi. We had the Ku Klux Klan. The Ku Klux Klan is very similar ideologically to the Nazis,

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National Socialism. Henry Ford, the incredibly wealthy car maker distributed hundreds of thousands of copies of his book, "The International Jew."

So, you had an incredibly strong fascist antisemitic movement. But at this time you, you had the "America First" movement, Lindbergh, he said, you know, the biggest threat to America is white people, the white race being overwhelmed in a sea of Mongols and Southern Europeans, I forgot exactly his terms, and Black people. So, this concern about racial dominance was very present. And then before the war, you had a very strong antisemitic movement and then Franklin Delano Roosevelt came and passed the New Deal, which made the sort of economic anxiety that feeds fascism less important. It reduced it. And that, I think, is what Joe Biden is trying to do today. What Joe Biden is trying to do is he's trying to reduce the threat, to reduce the potential supporters for a fascist social and political movement by something like a new deal. And I think the Republicans are trying to prevent him from doing that.

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SR: To pick up that point about demographic panic. It's about losing your country to somebody else, be they Blacks, Indigenous groups, Muslims etc., but this is a panic about "The Fear of Small Numbers," right? You're going to be outnumbered in your country. And part of the story is then that because numbers are so important in a democracy, you need the majority.

Let's skip immediately to the current moment, and that it's nearly eight months since Joe Biden's victory in the U.S. presidential elections. But the Republican Party is not only not willing to concede defeat, but we're seeing the bizarre spectacle of election audit still going on in Phoenix, Arizona, for

example, where they're hoping to discover that there was a "voter fraud" in the hope of being able to overturn the election results and hoping that that will also trigger recounting in other states. Laws towards voter suppression are being passed at breakneck speed in many states in the United States. What are the implications of these for the future of American democracy, which seems to be facing a really serious crisis of legitimacy?

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JS: The United States is a new democracy, a very young democracy. It's only been a democracy since the Voting Rights Act was passed. And a few years ago, the Supreme Court, the Justice Roberts-led Supreme Court essentially overturned the Voting Rights Act. And in one of their most recent decisions, the Supreme Court said that in order to show that any of these new voter suppression laws, these laws that are going to disenfranchise Black voters and minority voters, Democratic Party voters, let's be frank, that to show that any of these laws are unconstitutional, you will have to show that there was actual explicit intent. In other words, you're going to have to have a Republican Party official being caught on tape or on camera saying, "I don't like Black people, and that's why I supported this law," which is, of course, never going to happen.

So, we're rolling back the Voting Rights Act and I expect that this brief period of democracy in the United States will soon be over. The Democrats have a very narrow majority, but the Supreme Court is a six-three ultra-conservative majority. The reason Donald Trump couldn't take over in 2020, and simply take charge and have a second, or maybe even a third term was that there was no

legal framework. So, what's happened with these laws and state to state is they're creating the legal framework.

So, the laws, for instance, in the states say that if there's any dubiousness or any skepticism or controversy, then the state legislature can take over and supply their own set of electors. So, what that means and, of course, there will be, Black majority cities will be said to be corrupt. The Republicans control the legislatures, they'll be able to send their own electors. And the Supreme Court in 2024 is poised to then say, "Oh, the laws are in place. So, it's legal."

SR: So, therefore, you're getting a lot of the kind of voter suppression that we're seeing in the U.S. as a means to craft a permanent majority without having the numbers. Would that be one way of looking at it?

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JS: Absolutely. So, I don't think there's ever really been a time recently in my country, the United States, where we had anything like a full democracy. So, in the United States, you have a long history of Herrenvolk democracy, only the right people can vote. And we've continued that. After the civil rights movement, we moved right into mass incarceration.

You can't really in the United States say that Black Americans aren't American in the way that India is trying to say that Muslims are not really Indian with the CAA, the Citizenship Amendment Act, but you can imprison them *en masse*. So, we had 230,000 or 270,000 people imprisoned in federal system states and local jails in 1973, now we have well over 2 million. Also, we have probation,

we have felon disenfranchisement. Florida would be a reliably democratic state if its million felons were allowed to vote.

[00:12:30] So, we've had these mechanisms long in place to disenfranchise Black voters. And now we're moving into a much more explicit phase of that.

SR: So, let's stick to the term fascism and fascist for a moment because it's often being used quite loosely today. So, you have made a strong case in the book, "How Fascism Works," for separating fascist politics from fascist government. And the argument you make is that we should understand fascism as a series of techniques and tactics aimed at securing power. The mythical past we've just dealt with for the moment. Propaganda is something you've written about. But another one is the feeling of victimhood. And I think that's something we also need to talk about if we want to understand with you, how does the term fascism help us as an analytical lens to understand this ultranationalist, ethno-nationalist right-wing politics, which is on the ascendancy everywhere?

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JS: So, I think we have to bring in some psychoanalytic tools as well to understand the way a fascist leader stokes dominant group victimhood. So, in fascist politics you make members of the dominant group fear for their families. You create conspiracies that their daughters, their wives, their sisters are at risk from this foreign threat, this foreign and internal threat. The internal threat is to bring in the foreign group and the internal group is also destroying the traditional values from within. So, you say that there's an internal agenda to turn boys into girls, the gay agenda. There's an agenda to

empower women so men will have less power. And you need a powerful military violent response to this threat because the threat is so existential. And it's a threat to your manhood. You, you, the men of a dominant group, you, the country belongs to you, and they're trying to take it away from you.

So, Mária Schmidt, the far-right neo-fascist historian in Hungary, Orbán's historian, said when Germany...when Merkel brought a million Syrian refugees into Germany, she said, "Germans have lost their manhood."

So, what you have, the core of fascist politics is this dominant group victimhood, and the leader is a swaggering strongman who's going to protect you. He's going to protect your family, and he's going to do nasty things. You wouldn't do those things. You're a good person, a decent person, but you need someone to protect your family. And this is the kind of politics that then allows people to smash through rights, to significantly change structures. Because you give people this kind of complete panic that they're losing their way of life and their families.

SR: Let me pick up one point which just made, which is about patriarchy and a certain style of metropolitics, toxic masculinity.

[00:15:30] And this seems to be a thread which runs through almost all of these right-wing ethno-nationalist leaders. So, could you talk a little bit about how central this patriarch is to the question of fascism?

JS: So, it's everything because, first of all, the fascist leader is the father of the nation. He's the patriarchal father of the nation. So, the idea is legitimate authority in a patriarchal family is force. The patriarchal father has authority

through force. And so, in fascist politics, the brute, the authority is not epistemic authority, it's not that the fascist leader has greater access to the truth, is a better scientist or more of an intellectual, it's that he rules by force.

And that's what structure of patriarchy is. If you go back to U.S. defenses of slavery that George Fitzhugh in his book, "Cannibals All!" he says the only true freedom is Roman freedom, where the father of the household is the leader. The enslaved people are like children. The wife is like an enslaved person and the children are. And that's what freedom really is. And that's this anti-democratic structure. So, what you try to do is you try to get people to feel like that's the natural structure of things. And so, democracy is unnatural because this democracy tries to flatten that out.

And then we got back to demography. You know, if you disturb the patriarchal family, if women are working, then they're gonna have fewer children and the family is going to be hurt. You say that homosexuality is a threat to demography, women working as a threat to demography.

[00:17:00] Obviously, immigrants are a threat to demography. Feminism is a threat to demography. So, everything becomes a threat to demography because you whip up this panic and fear that the dominant group is going to lose its grip.

SR: Let me come to one other aspect which was just mentioned in passing, the major influence of conspiracy theory. The 6th of January insurrection at the U.S. Capitol was probably the most visible instance of the influence of outlets like QAnon, but I think it might be interesting to think with you about the

deeper and the more insidious role that conspiracy theories played since the rise of Trumpism more evidently, but even earlier.

JS: First of all, conspiracy theories are always central to any nation that has a hierarchical social structure with one group over the other because you have to say, "Uh-oh, there's a threat that the group on the bottom is gonna take over." So, in the United States, I mean, look at lynching, look at what happened with the racial terror against Black men which was a conspiracy theory, as Ida B. Wells showed when she went through all the different newspapers in the south and showed that even among the people who were lynched, less than a third were even accused of rape. And so, underlying the myth of Black criminality is a conspiracy theory that, you know, they're going to take over, there's going to be a race war.

Trump taps into this. Trump tapped into a very familiar narrative structure. Conspiracy theories tap into narrative structures that you have in the background, and they seem plausible because they're familiar. So, it's a familiar structure that the minority group is going after your women and, you know, they're seeking to outbreed you. These are familiar structures. If you think about, say blood libel, the conspiracy theory in Eastern Europe against Jews that Jews were stealing Christian babies, that also was meant to make you think, oh, no, your family's under threat.

[00:19:00] The conspiracy theories in the United States surrounding QAnon are also like that. There's a secret cabal of sex traffickers. They're taking little children. The Democrats are communists who are hiding these sex traffickers, and Donald Trump is gonna reveal them all. I mean, when you think about how

bizarre this has given how many women have accused Donald Trump of sexual impropriety, it's remarkable. But that's the structure of conspiracy theories and they've proven to be very powerful.

SR: And this influence continues to linger despite the effects of social media platforms like Facebook or Twitter to take punitive action against...

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JS: Despite. That's the right word there.

SR: Despite. Yes. That's I wanted to say. So, let's think about their role because they are claiming to take action against it. Should we say too little too late? Should we say that actually they are not even taking the action that they should be taking? And then come to the whole question of the right-wing attack on that as an attack on freedom of expression.

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JS: Now, one of my roles in propaganda conferences has always been to point out that this has long predated social media. But one of the issues facing us in fighting conspiracy theories is that we have the wrong structure of understanding. This isn't about misinformation; it is about social identity. Who's on your team and who's not. And what social media does is that it connects identity groups with likes and retweets. And so, you've got your identity group and your identity group shares certain things. They say certain things together. So, it's not really about misinformation. And furthermore, you can spread conspiracy theories without saying anything false. Like in Austria, a country with a very large far-right, you had this thing where they were telling

police stations only to report crimes by immigrants against Austrian women. Now, it's true that there are crimes by immigrants against Austrian women, so that's not misinformation. There are also crimes against Austrian women by Austrian men. That too would not be misinformation.

You don't eliminate the conspiracy theories just by eliminating the falsehoods because it has to do with the structure of what the philosopher, Susanna Siegel, calls a salient structure. You draw attention to certain parts of reality, and you give them access importance. And so, we don't really have a good method technologically of dealing with that. We can take away all the false statements from Facebook, but that's not how these things work.

SR: So, let's look at the question of freedom of expression, which I think has become a central question here with the right-wing claiming that any kind of curb on the kind of information that they want to put out, selective, partial, fake, as it may be is part of a curb on freedom of expression, so that it's the unfettered freedom of expression of which suddenly the right-wing has become a champion.

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JS: I think this is only ever a temporary thing because when the right-wing takeover institutions, they clamp down very hard on freedom of expression, as we're seeing right now in the United States, when I don't know how many states it is now, but somewhere between 6 and a dozen have already passed laws banning so-called critical race theory from being taught in schools, but it's actually much larger of a target that. The bill in Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania bans any public university from even paying for speakers who promote critical

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race theory. So, the way these bills are phrased, they say certain concepts promote critical race theory, and the Texas Public Policy Institute, a very powerful one, produced a list of concepts that supposedly promote critical race theory, including colonialism, social justice, Black Lives Matter. In other words, the Pennsylvania bill if this all comes together will prevent any public university from paying for any speaker or probably even any course in a public university on colonialism. So, it's profoundly hypocritical, but we know from the history of right-wing movements, especially fascist movements, they always begin by this free speech maneuver. There's a poster, a Nazi propaganda poster of Hitler with his mouth taped shut. And it says, "Hitler is the only person in the world who's not allowed to speak." So, it's all fake free speech. Free speech means we should be allowed hate speech, and once we come into power, we're going to fire anyone who speaks against us.

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SR: So, let me move you away, finally, from the United States because what I found really interesting is the resounding success of your book, "How Fascism Works," in Brazil. Could you say what resonated so much in Brazil when such a large readership was able to access, "How Fascism Works," and what kind of Brazilian politics is it that people thought would be interesting to think of in terms of fascism?

JS: Bolsonaro probably read my book and ran on it but was using it as a manual instead of as kind of a warning, which is something that I should have been more attentive to. But every single chapter of the book was his politics. He ran on homophobia, transphobia. He ran it against the supposed elites, the liberals

and leftists, and cultural Marxists. He targeted Paulo Freire, like in America, they target Angela Davis in critical race theory, like in Hungary, they target gender studies. And Bolsonaro ran a very macho campaign about how gender ideology was taking over. He ran against the emerging acceptance of homosexuals in Brazil.

[00:24:30] And he was supported by something that we're seeing worldwide, which is fundamentalist religion. So, we see in the Indian case, the Hindutva. In Eastern Europe, in Brazil, and the United States, we see a certain kind of Christianity, which is merging Christian nationalism. So that's what you had in Brazil. You had a very strong evangelical movement.

Bolsonaro ran a playbook fascist campaign all the way down to labeling his opponents as communists, calling for their imprisonment. And talking about the military dictatorship as if it was a great thing that was the mythic past and promising even to bring it back. And if you follow Brazilian politics, I mean, there've been a series of Naziesque scandals, like their culture minister with the Goebbels quotes. So, Brazil really has been a very playbook example.

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SR: Thanks ever so much, Jason.

JS: Thank you so much. It's been an honor to be in conversation with you.

SR: We've heard a strong argument for using the term "fascism" to understand the strategies used by many elected authoritarian leaders who govern former democracies today. Their toolbox includes conspiracy theories, that whip up hatred of minorities and promises of return to a glorious past to right the

wrongs of history. These leaders claim to represent the real voice of the people and to represent the name of the silent majority that has suffered disadvantage. Leaders like Trump in the U.S.A., Orbán in Hungary, Modi in India, or Erdoğan in Turkey stoke not only resentment of ethnic, racial, or religious minorities and refugees, but they also use sexual anxiety and the perceived threat to the masculinity of the majority group to create a demographic panic. This is the constant “Fear of Small Numbers,” of being outnumbered by the demonized others, those with too many children, and with alien, unassimilable values. Fears of losing the demographic race in a democracy are thus linked to voter suppression laws in the U.S. or changes in citizenship rights as in India. These laws are designed to disenfranchise citizens belonging to minorities who are seen as not really belonging to the body politic of the nation, which is defined in exclusionary ethno-nationalist terms.

This wraps up the last episode of season two of "Democracy in Question." I greatly appreciate the fact that you have joined us for these complex and important conversations. We'll bring you a third season very soon, but in the meantime, do go back and listen to any of the episodes that you might've missed.