

## Democracy in Danger

### S1 E2: Populismo

**Will Hitchcock** [00:00:03] Hello, I'm Will Hitchcock, professor of history at the University of Virginia.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:00:07] And I'm Siva Vaidhyanathan a media studies professor and director of UVA's Deliberative Media Lab.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:00:13] And this is Democracy in Danger, a show that explores the problems and crises facing democratic governance in the United States and around the world. So last time we talked to Nicole Hemmer of Columbia University about the conservative media landscape, the rise of the alt-right. And how both who shaped public discourse in America. Well, today, we're going global in search of insights about fascism, populism and illiberal democracy in Latin America.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:00:42] Now, Will, the scourge of the Coronavirus is really bringing all of this into high relief, infections across Latin America are surging, but leaders in some hard hit places like Brazil, Mexico and Nicaragua are downplaying the crisis. They're even denying basic science. So look at the President of Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro. You know, he claimed for the longest time that he was immune to Covid-19, because he's an athletic guy. And then he got sick and he tested positive. And when he announced that he tested positive, he pulled his mask off right in front of reporters to show them how well he was doing.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:01:21] Yeah, it's pretty astonishing. Bolsonaro has even boasted, like President Trump, about taking hydroxychloroquine, the antimalarial drug that studies show is ineffective against the coronavirus and it may even be harmful.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:01:33] Yeah. Meanwhile, the virus is exploding all across Brazil. Brazil has become one of the major hotspots in the world, right along with Russia and India and the United States. And these countries seem to have a lot in common.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:01:49] Well Siva, our guest today has suggested that leaders like Bolsonaro are trying to turn the pandemic to their advantage by ignoring facts, blaming the media, blaming the experts for the crisis and promising miracle cures. Well, all of this allows them to flex their authoritarian muscle. So we have Federico Finkelstein with us today. He's a historian at the New School in New York City. He's written extensively on autocratic trends around the world, including his first book, From Fascism to Populism in History and most recently, A Brief History of Fascist Lies. Federico, thank you for joining us.

**Federico Finchelstein** [00:02:23] Oh, my pleasure to be here.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:02:25] Federico, you grew up in Argentina, a country that has had a complicated and difficult relationship with democracy over time. Can you tell us a bit about Argentina's political history and how has that shaped your work and your life?

**Federico Finchelstein** [00:02:40] Well, I was born a little time before the coup d'etat that created, in a country that had many dictatorships broadly, the wars of a most lethal dictatorship in the history of our country. This was a dictatorship that decided that the people that disagree with its leaders, with the junta, were a terrorist. All of them decided to

go against its citizens and eventually killing thousands of them. I mean, the numbers of dead and between 15,000 and 30,000. And citizens were kidnapped, tortured and eventually disappeared. So that's why it's so hard to know that the exact numbers. I lived the first decade of my life under such a dictatorship. And I think it affect me deeply in many ways. And one of them is that once democracy returned, I was a young person first in a high school where many of the students had been, you know, disappeared, that is to say, killed. And eventually the university, when I entered the university, was just 10 years after the demise of the dictatorship. And then I decided to study history to a big extent because I wanted to understand why fascist ideologies lead to such political violence. And, of course, all these things are important for, in my view at least, for thinking about the present.

**Siva Vaidhyathan** [00:04:04] So this dictatorship in Argentina, would you describe it as fascist? And if so, what qualifies a dictatorship to be fascist?

**Federico Finchelstein** [00:04:16] Well, I wrote a book about the dictatorship, which is called Ideological Origins of the Dirty War. And in that book, my argument is that this is not perse, a fascist dictatorship. But it is a dictatorship which is inspired by fascist ideology. I see it emerge and develop first in the 1920s and 1930s. Now, more specifically in my work, I analyze why these dictatorships turn against its citizens, calling them terrorists. Basically, when these victims - citizens - were put in concentration camps and they were tortured the kind of conspiracy ridden questions that they were asked were fascist questions. And they were asked to confirm things that actually confirmed the lies and the propaganda of the dictatorship. So generally, that's how torture works. There is an idea that needs to be confirmed and people are subjected to extreme violence in order to confirm a truth, which is basically the ideology and propaganda, its not the actual truth. Because when these dictators and these fascists lie either and they believe their lies are the truth or they believe their lies are the servant of the truth, or - and this is the worst part of it - they believe that if reality doesn't conform to this ideological, quote unquote, truth, then it is this reality that needs to be changed in order to confirm the conspiracy. In order to confirm, basically, the lie. And that's pretty scary.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:05:45] Federico, I want to come back to the rule of falsehoods and lies in fascist governance. But before we get there, let me come to a second term that you use a lot and your writing alongside fascism, which is populism. And you have a view of populism in the post 1945 world as being maybe the more apt political term to describe what's happening around the world. Can you talk a little bit about populism and what it means?

**Federico Finchelstein** [00:06:11] Yes, of course. Populism existed clearly before the 20th century, and it emerged in places like Russia, the U.S., Europe also was present in Latin America. But my argument is that ideology, some movements are to some extent of limited importance until they become regimes, until they reach power. It was one thing before he did it and Mussolini came to power and he became a huge global thing once he achieved power. And this is the same with populism. And populism came to power for the first time in its history after 1945 in Latin America. These former dictators decided that they needed to reengage with democracy, to create fascism in a democratic key. And the result of that is Italian democracy, which is populism. Now they live behind three key elements. They left behind, of course, dictatorship. They left behind the glorification and the practice of political violence. And they left behind a racism and xenophobia that has been at the center of their politics. Now, when they leave those things behind, they created a modern populist regimes. And this is important because it shows already hat we are not talking about fascism when we talk about populism.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:07:35] Federico, talk a little bit more about the place of racism and xenophobia in populism. It seems to me as we look out at the contemporary political landscape, that racism, whether it's coded in certain keywords or whether it's overt, has come back to be a really at the center of populist politics. Do you agree or disagree with that?

**Federico Finchelstein** [00:07:58] I fully agree. And yet the circle is not complete. It's not that we are, at least at this point, returning to a fascism per se, but we are seeing a turning point in the history of populism in the sense that populism emerged as a way to reach power by leaving behind these key elements racism, violence and dictatorship, which were at the center of fascism. I mean, let me say this - from Juan Peron in Argentina to Julio Vargas in Brazil, to Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, these elements were not clearly important. Peron himself, the first populist elected to government, he said that he did not want to have fascism any close to him because he felt that these people will scare voters. And we are seeing at the center of this turning point. American history in Donald Trump, because we saw in his previous presidential campaign that he launched his campaign with racism and xenophobia at the center. As you might recall, he said that Mexicans were rapists and this kind of xenophobia and this kind of racism would have been anathema to previous populists, and yet he won. Now, if we go back to fascism, fascism destroys democracy from within, meaning it uses democracy to destroy democracy. It reaches power by electoral means and by legal means and eventually destroys all legality and of course, destroys all electoral means to deal with politics in a democratic key. Now, historically, populists did the opposite. People like Peron and Vargas, and there are similar examples in in Bolivia and Venezuela, they were dictators or they were allied with dictators. And they destroy dictatorship from within in order to create democracy. I mean, of course, the result of that was this authoritarian form of democracy, which involves, you know, issues of social justice and antiracism and at the same time that it involves authoritarian leadership. That's why populism is a kind of hybrid, which combines authoritarianism and democracy.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:10:04] I want to pick up on something that you just said that I think is really helpful when you talk about the way in which fascism has used democracy to destroy democracy, at least in a couple of important cases in the past. We think of the Third Reich, for example, of Germany. But in your most recent book, you talk about the way that demagogues manipulate reality. And this is a crucial element of their using the democratic sphere to their own advantage by flooding it with untruths, with falsehoods, with conspiracy theories. And I wonder if you could just remind us that what we're seeing today in the United States with all kinds of figures. Coming up with their own interpretation of reality that this isn't exactly new, right? This is something that demagogic leaders have tried again and again throughout the 20th century.

**Federico Finchelstein** [00:10:53] Yes, absolutely. What is new is that this is new in the history of populism. I mean, because this is the same as we were talking before. This was typical during the dictatorship that I grew up in in Argentina. I mean, in Argentina in 1982, it was dictators against, you know, reality. They decided to go to war against the United Kingdom. And I remember as a young kid listening to a TV and they were insisting every single day, I mean, this was the message, right, "We are winning" and we were losing big. Or as this president would say, Bigly! But in any case, I mean, the point is that these were lies which were typical of totalitarian dictatorship, such as the fascist one - the Argentine dirty war one, or Pinochet - but not on democracies. We are returning to the fascist ways of lying, which were not necessarily typical of populism per se. I mean Peron or Vargas in

Brazil, they will not lie like this. And yet we are seeing that these people are elected leaders, they are elected populists. And what are we seeing now? Well, that's the open question.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:11:58] Let me ask you to give us a concrete example and to take the case of Brazil. Do you put Jair Bolsonaro and his government on this continuum? Where we are? How are they manipulating facts? How are they using racism? How are they using xenophobia? Is violence and dictatorship in the picture? Try to map what's happening in Brazil today onto this interpretation.

**Federico Finchelstein** [00:12:24] Well, what is happening to democracy in Brazil is a disaster. The New York Times publish an article about how Bolsonaro is playing with the idea of a coup d'etat. A self coup d'etat what are we saying in Spanish 'auto-golpe.' I mean, a populist is destroying as a fascist would, destroying democracy from within. And in Brazil we have been seeing these for a long, long time, that this idea that democracy can be destroyed and it can be returned to the dictatorship that basically Bolsonaro has been glorifying for the last decades. And Bolsonaro was a character that has participated as a low ranking officer in a dictatorship. He has praised dictatorships I mean, Pinochet and others and on top of that, and as you said before, we are seeing Brazil reaching the heights of the pandemic also augmented amplify the responsibility of denying the facts and denying the science. So it goes back to this fascist way of lying in which the lie becomes the truth. And Bolsonaro has been even more radical and Trump in this regard. He has in the same way that after the Holocaust you had Holocaust denial, these leaders engage in science denial and the result of that is deadly. Heating wars, people dying because the leaders believe as Bolsonaro said this is just a little fever - and that's a quote - or that this should be treated with Malaria drugs that are totally unproven. So this combination of miracle cures, call for a coup d'etat, calls for more authoritarianism or even a dictatorship. In the context of the pandemic explains the disaster that Brazil is today.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:14:00] Federico, this notion that a fascist lie is a lie that becomes the truth. That raises an interesting question, given how we are trying to build up some resistance to that phenomenon, both in the United States and in Brazil. Now, it seems to me that Bolsonaro has not been very successful in his campaign to get people in Brazil to accept his lies as truth, his support is down near 30 percent. He seems to be failing in his economic agenda. He certainly has not succeeded in convincing people in Brazil that the Coronavirus is nothing to worry about, that it's just a flu. It seems like the goal isn't necessarily to convince people that a particular set of lies are true, but merely to flood the public sphere with enough nonsense, lies, distortions, distractions that the opposition finds it impossible to mount a coherent argument. At least that's what I see in the United States and how we react to Donald Trump. Is that similarly happening in other media ecospheres around Latin America?

**Federico Finchelstein** [00:15:22] Well, I absolutely agree with you that this is what we are seeing in the US and this is what we are seeing in Brazil. Now the other country that might look like these is Venezuela, which is interesting because both Trump and Bolsonaro would like to differentiate themselves from that. But Venezuela at this point, like Nicaragua, operates like a dictatorship. Now the rest of Latin America, what we are seeing is a totally different politics, although we sees one resembling more, I will say, Western Europe rather than the US or Brazil. These are the cases of Chile, Argentina, and Uruguay. So. I mean, in a way I would say that Brazil is being Americanized. Because Bolsonaro is trying to imitate Trump all the time. The difference is that he can get away with things that Trump so far has not been able to do. It's important, again, that there are

some pillars of democracy here which are an independent place, our right to talk and vote and protest. Now, Brazil at this point there is a 30 percent approval for towards Bolsonaro. But as scholars of Latin American dictatorship well know, you don't need more than that, because if you have the, let's say, the civil service and the armed forces, you can basically topple democratic governments with a lot of repression, but not necessarily with a lot of approval. So when Argentina had all these coup d'etats it's not that everybody was jumping in. But also, of course, what you have is a lot of apathy. So my point is in Brazil at this point, the concern is not whether the population is against him, I assure you Brazilians don't like Bolsonaro at this point. And my colleagues and friends are telling me that you could hear this, you know, almost every day in Brazil's main cities. Bolsonaro could get away with this by having, you know, some collaboration from the civil service and certainly from the armed forces. So that's why is the threat of a coup d'etat. Because he can get away with things that so far in the US, I mean, there is more institutional autonomy, I think. And I mean, this idea that you see all this. For example, generals talking against the President. You don't see that in Brazil.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:17:29] Federico, are you hopeful about the future of democracy in Latin America and the United States or are you pessimistic?

**Federico Finchelstein** [00:17:37] Well, I'm hopeful because we know - I mean, and this is important - we know what happened before. We know what happened when democracy was not defended properly. And I think we - I mean, even the fact that we are having this conversation shows that, you know, that this is a time to talk about these things in order to make it impossible for dictatorship or fascism to be amplifying the world. And I think in that sense that, you know, I'm positive. But it's still my opinion that we need to be extremely active at this point, that this is not - this is not late. And when it is late, we cannot even have this conversation anymore. I mean in a dictatorship we will not be able to have such a conversation. And when I was younger, I mean, these conversations were for me, I knew then, extremely dangerous.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:18:25] Federico Finchestein, thank you so much for joining us today on Democracy in Danger.

**Federico Finchelstein** [00:18:30] Thank you.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:18:48] Siva, that was really powerful. And to be reminded by Federico about growing up in Argentina he personally experienced life under a dictatorship. He's seen it up close. And so when he looks at what's going on in Brazil today, he's deeply worried. I think rightly so, as Brazil falls prey to populism. And as he sees it, even it seems to be slipping backward towards some fascist forms of rule.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:19:13] Yeah, and it's really important for us as Americans to recognize that the sort of varieties of illiberalism, the varieties of fascism that are sprouting around the world are often locally grounded and appeal to local issues. But there are themes and practices that are common among them. Right. So it's also important to remember that here in the United States, we're largely unfamiliar with thinking about and talking about authoritarianism and fascism as domestic phenomena. And so it's hard for us to assess whether what we're going through right now in the United States even comes close to what Argentina has experienced in real life, in recent history or what Brazil has experienced in real life in recent history. So if you grew up in Brazil, you grew up in Argentina, you actually have some life experiences and family experiences, some stories, some sense of recent history that that you can compare and contrast to. You know, maybe

we're not as on guard as some other places where people have very recent memories of fascism creeping in or rolling in.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:20:28] You know, one of the themes that seems to link together, some of the countries that we've been looking at in our discussions is the way that populism, whether it's in Brazil or in the United States, works through the ballot box. That's something Federico emphasized in Brazil or with Viktor Orban in Hungary, even Donald Trump in the U.S. You know, these guys came to power through a democratic process. And this is the key paradox, I think, of our time. There are a lot of voters who actually are uncomfortable with democracy and they see democracy as potentially harmful for their interests. So they're fine with the strongman type of populist leader who is openly working to subvert democracy by intimidation or voter suppression, stacking the courts and so on. This is just a fascinating tension that many countries are experiencing.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:21:22] Or maybe it's that a large number of people in many of these countries are very good with procedural democracy. They're comfortable with the idea that there should be a plebiscite and that the leaders should have this certification from the voters, even if there's some cheating at the margins. Right? And look, we saw this, you know, during the Cold War where there would be fake elections in the Soviet Union or in the Eastern Bloc, and then there would be a crowing of a democratic legitimacy. You know, Ceausescu always seemed to win his election with 103% of the vote in Romania. But even now, like, we actually have legitimate or quasi-legitimate, functional or operational democracy, that the trappings of democracy. Narendra Modi, clearly an authoritarian religious nationalist, has, you know, won his elections with first a plurality and then an overwhelming majority of the vote in his two consecutive elections in the world's largest democracy, a democracy that has just, you know, high levels of turnout in every election. So what he opposes are the principles of liberal democracy and notion of tolerance for dissent. The notion of having multiple parties that are able to operate without fear. All of those secondary levels of democracy seem to be in danger while the actual act of voting is often something that these leaders still support. They do, of course, want to control who gets to vote. And we're seeing that definitely here in the United States.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:23:06] And I think that another common practice within this realm of illiberal democracy is to try to manipulate the truth and particularly to trying to delegitimize the experts, to delegitimize the scientists because they are rival sources of authority. And we see this in Donald Trump's approach to the pandemic, we certainly see it in Brazil and in other cases.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:23:30] Yeah. But even that's not consistent across the world. Right. So you have AMLO in Mexico who is, you know, a left leaning populist who, you know, is certainly an invested in expanding the political power of ethnic minorities and the poor in Mexico. Who also is denying basic scientific facts about the current pandemic. And in contrast, you have Narendra Modi in India who totally embraces the scientific consensus, both in terms of the pandemic and COVID19 and climate change. So there are notable exceptions to the efforts to close down all recognition of science. But at the same time, Modi has and Modi's party has its own agenda to undermine history and threaten historians who challenge the party line on whether India is supposed to be a Hindu nation or not.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:24:31] Never forget. Historians can be dangerous, too. (laughter)

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:24:35] Apparently in India, they're considered dangerous. That is that is one of the more alarming things going on. So in other words, we see different targets of the attack on cosmopolitan expertise in different places. But I think fundamentally, we do see a similar playbook being run by many of these authoritarian leaders around the world.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:25:09] That's all we have for today on Democracy in Danger. Stay tuned for our next episode with our colleague here at UVA, Matt Hedstrom. He'll help us understand how religion has been deployed and exploited in American politics.

**Matt Hedstrom** [00:25:23] When I hear the term Christian nationalism, what I think it means most fundamentally is simply the idea that the United States is or has been or ought to be a Christian nation.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:25:35] And when you have a minute. Visit our home page Media Lab.Virginia.edu. You'll find links to all of our shows, news about the health of democracy and links to other stuff that we've been reading.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:25:47] Or pick up your phone and subscribe to Democracy in Danger. You can find this podcast wherever you get the rest of your podcasts. And while you're there, please reach out to us. Leave us a review. Let us know what you think of the show.

**Will Hitchcock** [00:26:02] Democracy in Danger is produced by Robert Armengol with help from Jennifer Ludovici. Support comes from the University of Virginia's Democracy Initiative and the College of Arts and Sciences. Democracy in Danger is a project of the Deliberative Media Lab at UVA. The show is distributed by the Virginia Audio Collective, a podcast consortium of WTJU Radio in Charlottesville. I'm Will Hitchcock.

**Siva Vaidhyanathan** [00:26:26] And I'm Siva Vaidyanathan. Until next time.