Roundtable on Populism and Perpetrator Studies: Introduction

Emiliano Perra

The last decade of the twentieth century was bookmarked by two works that captured important parts of its *Zeitgeist*. In 1989, Francis Fukuyama celebrated the 'unabashed victory of economic and political liberalism', leading to nothing less than the 'universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government', or in short: 'the end of history as such'.[1] The opposite bookend was Michael Hardt's and Antonio Negri's analysis of globalisation and its discontents in *Empire*, in which the very same multitude that sustain the oppressive forces of globalisation are also capable of subverting it, creating new democratic forms 'that will one day take us through and beyond Empire.'[2] Notwithstanding their wildly different political and philosophical outlooks, what these analyses had in common was a sense of optimism, cultivated in the Global North emerged victorious from the Cold War, that things were going to get better, that *the worse was over*. Globalised capitalism and dominant political liberalism in the North, exemplified in the Anglosphere by Clintonomics and New Labour's Third Way, held sway during a decade marked by the ostensibly limitless possibilities for economic and democratic development offered by the rise of the Internet. In this context, even remembering past genocides acquired an optimistic flavour, with the consolidation of the Holocaust at the centre of memory culture in the Global North becoming a sign of cosmopolitan memory, stretching across national borders and uniting Europe and other parts of the world.[3]

Seen from the vantage point of the present, it is fair to say that those predictions have not aged particularly well, and that we are in a very different phase marked by the decline of the Anglo-American liberal order, the return of ethnonationalism, and the substantial weakening of democracy around the world. The rise of populist leaders promoting authoritarian agendas and their corrosive impact on the rule of law, the

1   Francis Fukuyama, 'The End of History?', *The National Interest,* 16 (1989), 3–18 (pp. 3–4).
2   Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), xv.
3   Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider, 'Memory Unbound: The Holocaust and the Formation of Cosmopolitan Memory', *European Journal of Social Theory,* 5.1 (2002), 87–106. See also Jeffrey C. Alexander, 'On the Social Construction of Moral Universals', *European Journal of Social Theory,* 5.1 (2002), 5–85.

protection of rights and the very notion of truth, is before our eyes. It is not surprising at all that scholars of authoritarianism and political violence, including genocide, were among the first to turn their analytical tools to the investigation of the reality around them: Sarah Kendzior, Timothy Snyder, and Anne Applebaum did not take long to recognise in Donald Trump's style uncanny similarities with the Soviet and post-Soviet contexts.[4] Scholars of Fascism and of twentieth-century Europe like Federico Finchelstein and Jan-Werner Müller among others also rung the alarm bells.[5] The prolonged public health crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic has provided further ammunition for ruthless politicians to extract political capital from people's fear and anxiety.[6]

Furthermore, the twin predictions (or rather postulates) that globalization would render obsolete ethnic nationalism and that the Anglo-American post-war order would guarantee a liberal-democratic order have been discredited. First, from its entitled version in China to its wounded manifestation in Russia, its nostalgic reflection in India and its resentful expression in Brazil, nationalism is here to stay. In fact, one could argue that as an ideology it may have never experienced a stronger attraction than now, since its conflict potential is no longer limited to Europe. Around the world, nationalism feeds off populism and men such as Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin, Narendra Modi, Jair Bolsonaro, and many others are deeply aware of its potential to polarize and mobilize countless potential militants. Those who bear the brunt of the exclusionary nature of ethnic nationalism are the Uyghurs, Chechens, Indian Muslims, indigenous Amazonians, and others. This wave of populist nationalism does not show any sign of abating, as anti-refugee sentiment, revanchist ideas, and perceived grievances lead to a global process of galvanization. Second, entire generations of North Americans and Europeans have become accustomed to a world order in which the US and Western Europe were the guardians of the democratic rule of law in the west (but less so elsewhere). But

4 Sarah Kendzior, *Hiding in Plain Sight: The Invention of Donald Trump and the Erosion of America* (New York: Flatiron Books, 2020); Timothy Snyder, *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (London: The Bodley Head, 2017); Anne Applebaum, *Twilight of Democracy: The Failure of Politics and the Parting of Friends* (London: Allen Lane, 2020).

5 Federico Finchelstein, *From Fascism to Populism in History* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017); Federico Finchelstein, *A Brief History of Fascist Lies* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2020); Jan-Werner Müller, *What Is Populism?* (London: Penguin, 2017).

6 Giuliano Bobba and Nicolas Hubé, eds, *Populism and the Politicization of the COVID-19 Crisis in Europe* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021); Michael Burleigh, *Populism: Before and After the Pandemic* (London: Hurst, 2021).

this has changed in fundamental ways. Trump and his attempt to undermine American democracy was the tip of a much bigger iceberg, with right-wing movements across the western world flirting with authoritarianism: Viktor Orbán, Brexiteers, *Alternative für Deutschland*, *Rassemblement National*, and others have brought a crisis of democracy to the heart of Europe. Both nationalism and authoritarianism are conducive to generating and promoting violent militancy, embodied in the impressionable young (mostly) men ready for 'action'.

This roundtable takes the lead from the publication of three important books by Valentina Pisanty, Ruth Ben-Ghiat, and Alexander Laban Hinton that tackle specific aspects of the current populist wave.[7] Pisanty's *The Guardians of Memory* is a thought-provoking investigation of some of the many shortcomings of the dominant memory regimes informing Holocaust consciousness which have proven woefully inadequate to insulate society from xenophobia and intolerance. In her interview with Emiliano Perra for this roundtable, Pisanty goes even further, stating that 'independently from their promoters' intentions, current memory regimes operate in the same discursive field as the ultranationalist rhetoric, even if from opposite positions.' Ben-Ghiat's *Strongmen* explores some of the deeper roots of the current age of authoritarian populism, going as far back as the 1920s and the rise of Mussolini to show how such leaders use violence, corruption, censorship and a hypermasculine image to legitimise their attacks on democracy; as Ben-Ghiat explains in her interview with Susanne Knittel, the assault on inconvenient knowledge, the historical record, and the very notion of 'truth' is part and parcel of their modus operandi. Hinton's piece for this roundtable discusses one representative example of Donald Trump's systematic use of 'racist dog whistles and fearmongering to appeal to a larger white nationalist audience […] obsessed with the threat of white genocide'.

Whilst engaging with different aspects of the complex populist prism, the three books at the root of this roundtable share some themes like the inadequacy of liberal discourse to stem the populist tide, as well as the distortion of truth, hypermasculinity, violent and even pre-genocidal rhetoric informing ultranationalist politics, that are all relevant to our journal. The themes raised by Pisanty, Ben-Ghiat, and Hinton are then built upon by Luisa Morettin and Wulf Kansteiner in their pieces:

7 Valentina Pisanty, *The Guardians of Memory and the Return of the Xenophobic Right* (New York: Centro Primo Levi Editions, 2021); Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Strongmen: How They Rise, Why They Succeed, How They Fall* (London: Profile, 2020); Alexander L. Hinton, *It Can Happen Here: White Power and the Rising Threat of Genocide in the US* (New York: New York University Press, 2021).

Morettin takes the lead from Ben-Ghiat's *Strongmen* to investigate the relationship between authoritarianism and technology as an essential nexus through which strongmen 'can both secure their hold on power and silence the opposition', whereas Kansteiner's broad-ranging contribution explores the complex relationship between memory and forgetting (and censorship) in the age of social media and authoritarianism. We hope readers of JPR will enjoy the reflections presented in this roundtable.

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Emiliano Perra is Senior Lecturer in Modern European History at the University of Winchester.