**John Torpey** 00:00

Hi, my name is John Torpey, and I'm director of the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Welcome to International Horizons, a podcast of the Ralph Bunche Institute that brings scholarly expertise to bear on our understanding of a wide range of international issues.

**John Torpey** 00:03

Great to have you with us. So, tomorrow, you're officially publishing a book with the title "Strongmen" that analyzes that that phenomenon from Mussolini to the present, as the subtitle has it. Why are we seeing such a spread of the strongman phenomenon in contemporary global politics today?

**John Torpey** 00:19

Today we explore political figures known as "strongmen" with Ruth Ben-Ghiat, a historian at NYU who has just published a book discussing precisely that phenomenon. Ruth Ben-Ghiat is professor of history at Italian studies at New York University. She writes on authoritarian leaders, fascism, and propaganda. She's a regular commentator for CNN and other news and analysis sites. She appears frequently on radio, podcasts and television, and is quoted in news stories around the world on threats to democracy and how to counter them. Thank you so much for joining us today, Ruth Ben-Ghiat.

**Ruth Ben-Ghiat** 01:02

Thank you for having me.

**Ruth Ben-Ghiat** 01:26

I think that there are people who go back to 2008, the recession, and the rise of far right populist movements, that certainly has something to do with it. I think that there's also been a disaffection with democracy. And I also think that the way that authoritarianism works today, where you have far fewer one party states, and more states in which it's evolution and not revolution, where they get in through elections, and gradually over time, concentrate their power and consolidate their power. And that makes it easier to live with this kind of illiberal rule than when you had the days of a military coup or a fascist takeover.

**John Torpey** 02:22

So, why is this a male phenomenon? I mean, I have read a little bit in the book and you're obviously using a term that has a gendered character to it. And you make a significant amount of the gender characteristics of this sort of political personality. And of course, we've had a lot of attention in the course of the pandemic, to female leaders who seem to have done a good job by their citizens: Angela Merkel in Germany, Jacinda Ardern in New Zealand. So what's the gender side of this story?

**Ruth Ben-Ghiat** 03:05

What I do in the book is I lay out the playbook of the tools of rule that they have been used for 100 years. And there's propaganda, there's corruption, there's violence, there's the myth of national greatness. But I also, I added a chapter on virility, or machismo, because when we see Putin striding around with a shirt off, it's easy to just laugh at this, many people admire it, but I think it's important to take it seriously because male domination and this ethos of macho lawlessness is really at the center of authoritarian rule. Now, that doesn't mean that there can't be a woman in the future, who will destroy democracy. There have been plenty of tyrants in the past of the global history who are female, and I conclude, saying that in the future, we may see a far right, authoritarian state that's headed by a woman. So it's not that women are morally better than men. But the the phenomenon as we've been seeing it of the strongman ruler, and I use that term to refer not only to somebody who damages or destroys democracy, but who actively uses this kind of machismo not only for politics of intimidation and threat and propaganda, but also in his foreign relations, these personal bonds with other rulers and this is important to the strong man bond think of Putin, Erdogan, Trump, and Netanyahu, all of these like "bromances" as people say. So that kind of demonstrative virility would go away with a female leader, but the rest of the toolbook would not. I am pretty certain of that.

**John Torpey** 05:08

Right. So I want to go back to something you said in response to my first question, and it had to do with your argument or claim that people have gotten sour, basically, on democracy. I wonder if you could expand on that and say a little bit more about what you mean, and why that's the case?

**Ruth Ben-Ghiat** 05:32

Yeah, I mean, there's a myriad of analyses of why that is. What I found in my historical study, I'm not a political scientist, but one of the reasons I wrote the book was to find these patterns. And one of the patterns that emerges most clearly is that these kinds of rulers find favor at times when there's been a lot of progress in emancipation. It could be gender emancipation, could be racial emancipation, class, fear of the left in the 1920s and early 30s. And this is when there's a sensation that some other kind of law and order rule is needed to, sort of, turn the clock back. Of course, it's also an alternate way to modernize. But that's a kind of historical route.

**Ruth Ben-Ghiat** 06:38

And we saw that in America in 2016 with this. Some people never got over the affront of having Barack Obama as president for eight years. And the demographic - another huge recurrence is fear of demographic change, which is again, related to racial emancipation. So disaffection with democracy, there are issues of, you know, economic inequality, which are very, very high right now. Think of all the protests in 2019, around the world. And that leads, so economic reasons, certainly lead some people to far right parties. But these kind of fantasies of national purity and feeling that you can have a refuge and this kind of strongman rule and this crisis politics that you want to save your - to solve your problems, often by scapegoating others. These are very powerful sentiments, which recur for 100 years all over the world. And so we need to factor them in when we think about why there are these recurring phases in which democracy doesn't have the same appeal.

**John Torpey** 07:50

I'm curious how you would see Donald Trump's position in the context of the broader historical framework that you've just been laying out. I mean, the United States is often seen as this exceptional nation having its own path in the world and that sort of thing. How do you see what's been happening here against the background of all the other people you've studied and written about?

**Ruth Ben-Ghiat** 08:14

I've seen him very much as an American instance of the way that authoritarianism is unfolding today. And he's used the playbook of corruption, incitements to violence of certainly of machismo, of propaganda - he is unparalleled propagandist - very, very successfully to build a personality cult, which has the same structure and rules as many of those. And he's done this without full state control of media. So his achievement is all the greater in this area. I also see him as conforming to a type of subset of authoritarian rule called personalist rule, where the leader's personal financial needs, and judicial woes, and interests, and obsessions become the center of party policy. They become the center of sometimes foreign policy, deals with other despots. And they also set the tone for media coverage. And when you have personalist rule, and this can happen in democracy and Berlusconi in Italy, who ruled off and on in the early 2000s is the pioneer of the template that Trump has enacted, where he never destroyed democracy. He's severely crippled it. Berlusconi was able to pass dozens of ad personam laws that, like for example, when he would get accused of bribery, he would have a law passed that made bribery a lesser offense, and on and on and on with this.

**Ruth Ben-Ghiat** 09:49

So this is personalist rule and Trump's domestication of the GOP and his absolute monopoly of the media landscape where everybody sits and says, "What's Trump going to do today?", and all attention is focused on him. These are kind of indexes of personalist rule. So in his temperament in his governing style, in his intentions, even though they weren't fulfilled, he has absolutely continued the tradition of authoritarian rule. And we haven't yet digested the scope of what he has done to our institutions with the kind of passive purges and active purges of the civil service, domestication of the judiciary, with William Barr. All of this, it still awaits to be processed and digested, I would say.

**John Torpey** 10:38

Nor have we, as far as I'm aware, in American history ever had a situation in which a sitting president responded to his failure to be reelected by saying that the election was essentially a fraud, which Donald Trump stood up and did in a press conference on last Thursday night. And I thought it was an astounding moment that we were living through. And if somebody were allowed to get away with this kind of rejection of popular will, I mean, the game would, so to speak, be over. So I wonder how you see that? How you see his refusal to concede the, you know, that he's lost the election? And what kinds of things might play out in the course of this next lame duck period until January 20.

**Ruth Ben-Ghiat** 11:34

I wasn't at all surprised that he's refusing to concede that. Today, there's an announcement he's running again, he's going to have you know, rallies. And I really think that we we've been using a framework of democracy, to analyze the actions of someone who is not interested in democracy, who is interested in autocratic rule of the type that all of the leaders he admires have pulled off. While he's been in office, Putin's have been able to amend the constitution to be there till 2036. And now Orban rules by decree. And those people have been there a long time. And so sometimes people say, "Well, how can you say is an authoritarian, you know, you're talking and, you know, there's fake news", but they forget that these people started somewhere. And it took them quite a while to evolve into what we see today.

**Ruth Ben-Ghiat** 12:28

So as for the trying to say that the election was fraudulent, you know, Berlusconi did the same thing when he was defeated in 2006. After five years, they have a different system. He claimed it was fraudulent. And he immediately started planning his comeback. And he got back into office in 2008, and was more corrupt than ever. So the lesson is, these people don't necessarily go away. And what I always say is, once they get into office, it's very hard to get them out. Now, we have voted him out. But it's a very delicate period that we are awaiting, not only because of his temperament - I just published a Washington Post op-ed today about how this type of leader, they just can't handle failure, and then they don't have good exits from power.

**Ruth Ben-Ghiat** 13:16

But also his followers, when you've had a personality cult of the magnitude of his, he's still got 70 million people to vote for him. And, you know, they say things like "I'd take a bullet for him". There's a woman who said "I would wade through a sea of COVID for Trump". And, and these are kind of, you know, it's a cult - a personality cult. And so they are in a very delicate moment as well, because their leader who's their mainstay of their lives, has been displaced. So all of this victimhood - the cult of victimhood is very important for these leaders - that will continue and be milked all the more now that he's in distress. And people feel protective of these leaders, which can be hard to grasp, because they're such bullies, but people feel very protective of their leader. So I think we're in for an unstable time. He's going to do everything he can not only legally but you know, with propaganda, like the themes I just described.

**John Torpey** 14:12

So I didn't know about the Washington Post op-ed. So tell me a little bit about how you see the exit paths. I mean, many people have talked about his possible influence, you know, in the post-Trump era, that he'll be a kingmaker in this sort of thing, run again himself in 2024. But that all seems to me to ignore the likely financial and legal peril in which he's about to find himself. And it seems to me, some people have noted that some parts of his thinking now are governed or sort of determined by his concern about what kind of legal difficulties he's likely to face. So I wonder, maybe you could talk about your op-ed and tell us a little bit more about what's in it and how you see, you know, an exit path. Because it does also seem to me that, you know, insofar as it is clear that he has actually lost this election, I think the institutions of the United States are going to be strong enough to see to it that he leaves. But maybe you see that differently. So I'd be interested in hearing your, you know, what you think about his exit paths?

**Ruth Ben-Ghiat** 15:30

Yeah, I am, the op ed really was about it's about how the whole structure of this personalist rule that these leaders set up contributes to their shock that they are going to be booted out of office. Because they create these kind of inner sanctums full of flatterers and family members, son-in-laws, in order to surround themselves with only the reality that they want to hear. And this, you know, causes them to make very bad decisions over and over again, and they are destructive, but they become self destructive. And, you know, a good maxim is that sometimes they're the last to know that they are ripe for a fall, because they live in this cocoon of their own propaganda. And they famously don't take any counsel. If you recall, Trump was asked early on, maybe even during his campaign who he consults with on foreign policy, and he said, "I consult with myself because I have my own big, beautiful brain". And this is the solipsism of the strong man.

**Ruth Ben-Ghiat** 16:43

And so the structure of these personalist governments where everybody's there because of loyalty, not expertise, leads them to not be able to prepare for succession. You don't mention - this is why again, Putin has put himself - he would be in his 90s by the time he left office, or even older. And this is also to avoid prosecution. So it's very much on Trump's mind to stay in office so he can keep immunity. And to keep the situation where the Senate voted to acquit him for impeachment. And one of the most significant things I read, at that time was an op-ed by Sherrod Brown, who went around and interviewed his fellow Senators. He's a Democrat, and he interviewed Republicans, and all of them said that they voted - they wouldn't identify themselves, but they said they voted out of fear. So when you have Senators, very powerful men, voting out of fear to acquit Trump, you have a situation that I don't see as a very democratic governance. So he's been used to this degree of power and bullying and humiliation. And so this makes it very hard for him to imagine a future in which he doesn't have the same.

**John Torpey** 18:03

Interesting. So, you know, back to the issue of the larger international context. I mean, I wonder how you see the impact of Trump's apparent fall. You know, for other strong man around the world, the kind of people that he's been cozying up to in the course of these last four or five years and for longer, in many cases. You know, Putin, you've mentioned Xi Jinping, he also seemed to rather admire, of course, Kim Jong-Un, you know, how does how is the world changed for people like that as a result of these developments?

**Ruth Ben-Ghiat** 18:43

Well, you know, some of them came out immediately, like Modi and Netanyahu with a warm message of welcome for Biden and Harris, and these are transactional people. Authoritarian-minded leaders are the ultimate opportunists and, you know, we like to see them as having a master plan, but they're just opportunists and transactional, so whoever's in they'll deal with. Now somebody like Putin, it's a bit different because of the financial hold, he's always had, indirectly, on the Trump Organization. You know, we can recall that before 2015, both Eric, and Donald Jr. said very openly to the press, that they didn't need any money because they had Russian money. And then they also had Deutsche Bank, of course. But, at the same time, Russian television has been mocking Trump. So this is the the kind of alpha male; there's a kind of lack of respect for leaders who kowtow to you. So Trump has been mocked openly. There was even a skit on Russian television where Trump was wearing a dog tag that read, "if lost send to Putin". So Putin is going to lose this. And of course this is, you know better than I do, why they didn't want Clinton in the first place.

**Ruth Ben-Ghiat** 20:16

But there was also an interesting item - I don't know if it's confirmed - but that Bolsonaro was considering not running for office again. And he has not given a welcome yet to Biden. So there is the, when you asked the beginning, why are there so many strong men, there is the factor of contagion or example where the more one has success in destroying international codes and human rights and pulling out of pacts, the more others feel legitimated to do illegal things. And there has been this attempt by Trump to take us out of one democratically-oriented system and put us into another. And this is something we will have to reckon with; he's done enormous damage internationally. So it remains to be seen how much of this can be reversed. I know that one of the first things that Biden's going to do is get back into the climate accords and begin the rapprochement process in certain sectors.

**John Torpey** 21:29

So what institutions do you think it's most important to reform in order to constrain or prevent more authoritarians from taking over their countries, and perhaps most particularly the United States? It's not lost on anybody that Trump has governed by Twitter, by tweet, and people find out that they've been fired, because it goes out on Twitter, not because they've received any official statement from him, where policies are announced within however number of characters you're allowed to have on Twitter these days. So I wonder whether you think that's the key to a lot of this, or is that you know, something that's happened before with other technologies. And I just wonder what you would say, as far as institutional reforms that you think are most important in terms of putting a stop to this kind of takeover of democratic societies.

**Ruth Ben-Ghiat** 22:40

And the example you gave of the person who finds out they're fired on Twitter, this is consistent with the strong man's need to humiliate other men publicly. And so one of the kind of divide and rule - that's the strategy where you keep everybody uncertain about their jobs, so they can't band together against you. And Mussolini used to use the newspaper. So his head of his party in 1931, found out he was fired in the newspaper. And Mobutu, in the Congo, used to hold rallies and announced - you know, with everybody sitting in the front row - in front of everybody who was fired. And so Trump uses Twitter, and you had Rex Tillerson who reportedly you know, read about his firing when he was on the toilet, scrolling through Twitter. So these are mechanisms, rituals of humiliation that strongmen relish. This example of how the book is designed to show what stays the same and what changes. So here we have media that change, but the dynamic of governance stays the same.

**Ruth Ben-Ghiat** 23:55

In terms of what should be reformed, what I decided to focus on in the book, are actually two sectors that have propped up strong men and allowed them to rule and one is, you know, foreign banks, and the architecture of secrecy around banking, which used to be Swiss bank accounts in the era of the Cold War and until 2018, really. But also offshore, where you have the example of, you know, Pinochet and of course, Putin, who had millions of millions of dollars - Putin has billions in offshore accounts. So the United States is obviously part of this, the Maloney Act was passed that it makes it harder now to be anonymous, but until 2019, and it doesn't govern things opened, it grandfathers in all accounts before 2019. So unless we reform that secrecy that allows these hypocrites like Putin and Erdogan and Orban. They claim they're anti-globalist. And then they keep their money in global accounts, they get their money out of their country. So that's one area that needs reform.

**Ruth Ben-Ghiat** 25:15

The other thing I highlight is foreign PR companies and American PR has propped up every dictator, right-wing dictator from Mussolini through Franco had a huge crew of PR firms working for him to rehabilitate him so he wasn't seen as a fascist. And he became the perfect Cold War client. Up through Erdogan who, right, has five different American PR firms working for him. So I think we need a cultural shift to encourage international law firms and PR firms and lobbyists. If they're serious about protecting democracy, then perhaps they shouldn't work for these people. Because Putin was Time's Man of the Year because Ketchum, his PR company, lobbied so hard for him to be. So those are the areas I decided to single out in the book because I think they don't get enough attention.

**John Torpey** 26:18

I see. I mean, I know you're busy with engagements in connection with the release of the book, but I do have one more question that I like to ask you. And that has to do with the Fox News connection. Many people have observed that there seems to be a kind of withdrawal of the "mandate of heaven" on the part from Trump on the part of Rupert Murdoch. I wonder how, you know, important you see that as being, and what you think the implications are?

**Ruth Ben-Ghiat** 26:53

I have a bit of, you know, I'd say that with a grain of salt, because our standards that low that just because Rupert Murdoch said, "Okay, let's recognize this actual legal vote", he's now good guy. You know, Fox News will continue, as it is still doing with its star hosts, Hannity and Ingraham and Carlson, who draw too many viewers to be dispensable. So it will continue as it was before Trump to be a factory of right wing propaganda of anti-democratic propaganda. I don't see that changing. In fact, Trump could have a closer - he was getting fed up with them at points because he needs absolute loyalty.

**Ruth Ben-Ghiat** 27:40

But one thing I would like to point out that's different. Trump is different than all other leaders I've studied, because, even Burlesconi - who owned TV networks and was truly a master of television, that medium - he read, he read books. And he read his briefing papers and his dossiers that his aides prepared for him. Trump doesn't read and I believe his first wife Ivana, who said that he had two books in his bedroom, he had "Art of the Deal" and Hitler's speeches. So Trump has not only, you know, normally there's like the leader, and then the allied media, or state media will echo what he says. Trump because he gets all of his information about the world from TV, he's actually got a feedback loop with Fox News that's been very effective, where sometimes he parrots what they say. So Sean Hannity has been in some ways a co-producer of the Trump presidency. And this is unique in our history, because we haven't had a man in power, who's so television obsessed as Trump. Even Reagan wasn't anything close to Trump in this in the sector.

**John Torpey** 28:56

Fascinating. Thank you very much. I want to bring this to a close. I want to thank Ruth Ben-Ghiat for sharing her insights about strong men, in connection with the publication of her new book with that title, about strong men around the world and of course in the United States itself. I want to thank Hristo Voynov for his technical assistance. And this is John Torpey, saying thanks for joining us, and we look forward to having you with us again for the next episode of International Horizons.