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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

OCTOBER 30, 2018

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01.11.2018

Fascism Denial Ignores Some Inconvenient Truths



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The massacre of 11 Jews at a Pittsburgh synagogue, the arrest of a far-right serial bomber in Florida, and probably the killings of two African Americans in Kentucky, should be signs that fascism is no longer an abstract threat, but is right on our doorstep. In the same way, the recent intensified hurricanes in Florida, Texas, and Puerto Rico should confirm that the climate crisis is no longer a future possibility, but has already arrived.

But in the same way that too many Americans engage in Climate Change Denial, many Americans are now engaging in “Fascism Denial.” An existential threat to our humanity

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seems so enormous and threatening that it cannot possibly be real. If we knew the inconvenient truths about both, we may either feel overwhelmed and powerless, or realize we have to make radical changes to adequately confront them.

Robert Bowers and Cesar Sayoc have added their names to the pantheon of 2010s far-right killers including Jared Loughner (who shot a congresswomen and others in Arizona), Wade Michael Page (who murdered Sikhs in a Wisconsin temple), Dylann Roof (who massacred African Americans in a Charleston church), Jeremy Christian (who knifed two white men defending African American women on a Portland train), and James Alex Fields (who drove into an anti-fascist protester in Charlottesville).

It is far too easy to dismiss these “lone wolves” as mentally ill loners, rather than to understand the political roots and rationales of their actions. It is also too easy to point only to President Trump’s ramped-up nationalist rhetoric, or the midterms and refugee caravan crisis, as the short-term source of the current upsurge in violence. Far-right authoritarianism is a longer-term global trend, as we can have seen in countries such as Hungary, Austria, Poland, Italy, Turkey, Israel, Saudi Arabia, the Philippines, and now Brazil.

I’ve long paid close attention to the growth of fascist ideology, as the son of a Hungarian survivor of the Holocaust. Three years ago, I witnessed the Syrian refugee crisis unfold in Budapest only a block where my Jewish father had himself been interned as a refugee. Last year, my college was targeted by a far-right rally and terrorist threat after false claims that a campus diversity program and anti-racist protests endangered the “free speech” of whites. Racist death threats seemed to come out of nowhere, but they were systematically generated by a far-right network of websites, trolls, and vloggers that had grown quietly in recent years.

Just as climate change has gradually crept into our lives, and we notice it only when a major storm, drought, or flood dramatically announces its presence, fascism has gradually crept out from under its racist rocks that have long been embedded in our society, and we only notice when it erupts in violence. We try to deny the crisis, or explain it away as part of some other, more easily grasped issue, rather than face the realities head on.

Violence is the symptom, not the disease

One form of Fascism Denial is to conflate far-right militancy with other forms of violence. Could we please stop lumping in an attack on a temple, black church, mosque, or immigrant center with other horrible mass shootings randomly targeting any civilians in a

mall, school, or theater? Far-right targeted shootings are political acts, meant to terrorize a specific group of people. That's why they're called "terrorism" and "hate crimes."

The risk of a random shooting is spread out amongst hundreds of millions of Americans, of all backgrounds, whereas most far-right attacks (especially the homegrown variety) are meant to terrorize groups numbering only in the millions or hundreds of thousands. The goal of the attacks is to isolate these groups and cause them to fear their own visibility, rather than to nihilistically creating panic among the entire society. Although many of random shootings are also by militaristic and misogynist white men, the specific targeting of ethnic, racial, and religious "minorities" is its own distinct problem that can't be solved just with stronger gun laws.

They're not your grandparents' fascists

A second form of Fascism Denial is to dismiss any far-right action committed by an individual who doesn't fit the simplified stereotype of ignorant Klan hicks or Nazi goosesteppers, or describe fascists as mere clowns. The "alt-right" movement should have alerted us that fascists could be wearing a suit and tie, or posing as hipster libertarians attacking so-called "identity politics" and defending "free speech" and "diversity of opinion" (for those who oppose diversity). We challenge fascists not because of their speech, but because of the actions that their speech generates, which we've seen up close this week.

Fascists can sometimes sound progressive to those who have not studied their tactics. Far-right leaders from David Duke to Lyndon LaRouche and Pat Buchanan have long portrayed themselves as opponents of free trade deals, Pentagon militarism, and corporate power. Milo Yiannopoulos and the Dutch far-right leader [Geert Wilders](#) depict themselves as defending gay rights from Muslim immigrants. These masking strategies are meant to sow confusion, and hide the far-right agenda of linking elite economic oppression from above to the claimed "oppression" of whites by manipulated "subhumans" (such as blacks and immigrants) from below.

Fascists are more diverse than you may think

A third, and related, form of Fascism Denial is to simplistically equate it only with white supremacy. Fascists advocate absolute rule by an ethnic, racial, or religious group, whether they are white European supremacists, Japanese fascists in the Axis, Latin American death squads, or Rwandan genocidaires. As Cesar Sayoc shows, a Filipino-Italian-American [falsely claiming Seminole heritage](#) can also become an anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant Christian Supremacist.

In the U.S., we don't just have one generic racist history, but three distinct racist histories rooted in slavery (for African American labor), genocide (for Native American land), and xenophobia (to justify foreign conquest and depict immigrants as a cultural threat). White elites have for centuries enlisted dominated people (from Native slavecatchers to Buffalo Soldiers) in the racist domination of others, in a series of divide-and-conquer strategies. Far-right groups such as [Patriot Prayer](#) love to point to their token members of color to distract attention from their real agenda.

Not just a way to say “meanie”

A fourth form of Fascism Denial is to loosely use terminology so that it loses its real meaning, or subsumes it within a short-term electoral agenda. Loosely using the term “fascist” should not just be a way to say “meanie,” or criticize any conservative government policy or action. George W. Bush or the Koch Brothers may be reactionary conservatives, but they uphold a global capitalist status quo with the U.S. at its center. Fascists want to overthrow the present system, and replace it with their own far-right revolution. They form fake-populist social movements to gain a following, and after they take state power they usually fuse the state with corporate interests.

Another problematic use of terminology is to adopt far-right assumptions even when arguing against them. A recent example has been to accept the portrayal of the Central American caravan as a crisis of “illegal” migration. The refugees are following U.S. laws by seeking asylum from extreme violence. The caravan and detained children are a question of legal immigration being blocked by racist xenophobes, but most media are caving to the Bannionist far-right by accepting the premise of illegality.

Conspiracy theories are at the core

A fifth form of Fascism Denial is to chalk up far-right beliefs to generic “hatred” or “incivility” that can be overcome if we just discuss our differences, and equates fascist anger with anti-fascist anger. This tendency overlooks the main tool of fascist ideology, which is not anger, but cold, calculating conspiracy theories that totally explain a complex world to gullible followers. A series of these conspiracy theories have recently converged in the [QAnon cult](#), identifying George Soros and Jewish financiers as the masterminds of an elite globalist conspiracy. The Hungarian government has plastered posters [denouncing Soros](#) as an enabler of refugees, and the Hungarian fascist sympathizer [Sebastian Gorka](#) likewise bashes him on Fox. It is no accident that Bowers similarly massacred Jews [for assisting refugees](#).

QAnon began on 4chan one year ago, on October 28, 2017, based on the premise that a high administration official (“Q Anonymous”) is leaking “crumbs” that connects all real and fake news (such as the Pizzagate “sex ring”) into a grand conspiracy that undermines Western civilization. A 9-minute [QAnon video](#) shows most of the targets of Sayoc’s mail bombs, and identifies Muslims, Latino immigrants, feminists, gun control supporters, and climate justice activists as dehumanized tools of the globalist elites, with Trump and Putin as their main obstacles to power. It ends with a skull and death threat: “”God will judge our enemies — we will arrange the meeting.” Bowers “[followed the dark conspiracy QAnon](#),” but thought it and Trump too moderate, much as ISIS emerged as critics of a too-soft Al Qaeda.

We can do something about it

A sixth form of Fascism Denial, as in Climate Change Denial, is to assert that even if it is real threat, it is already too gargantuan and global for us to do anything about it. This is an updated version of the old, tired claim “if we just ignore them they’ll go away.” I’ve noticed that people who minimize or trivialize far-right violence tend to be from populations that are not directly threatened by it. The problem is that anti-fascist strategies based on establishment politics have so far been ineffectual, and actually reinforce the rebel image of the far-right. The only effective way to fight right-wing fake-populism is with progressive populism, not with upholding the status quo.

As a geographer, I’ve noticed that many of the recent far-right attacks emerged from “swing areas” that are going through both racial-demographic and political changes, so such “purple” areas need to be given special attention in anti-fascist organizing. I’ve also noticed that most progressive politics are limited to large urban areas, leaving a vacuum in rural areas. Locally based [unlikely alliances](#) can lure rural whites away from the fake-populism of the Bundys and their ilk, toward cooperating with their neighbors of color. More progressive educational resources and media can also be put into the “in-between” [small, deindustrialized cities where the battle for the heart and minds](#) of Americans is taking place. Probably the most critical single battle is within high schools, where [far-right groups are recruiting](#), and young people are eager to organize against them. Please spend some time dissuading any friends or family who are unknowingly repeating right-wing conspiracy theories that undermine democracy. We can access solid analysis from longtime researchers who didn’t just discover the far-right in the past two years, such as [the Institute for Research & Education on Human Rights \(irehr.org\)](#), [Political Research Associates](#) ([politicalresearch.org](#)), [Southern Poverty](#) [Law](#)

[Center](http://splcenter.org) (splcenter.org), [Searchlight](http://searchlightmagazine.com) (searchlightmagazine.com), and [Showing Up for Racial Justice](http://showingupforracialjustice.org) (showingupforracialjustice.org).

Like in facing the climate crisis, confronting the threat of fascism cannot be predicated on waiting for government action from above, or the results of the next election, but starting to form a patchwork of models from below, at the local, grassroots level. Learning the inconvenient truths about fascism, like learning about the climate crisis, could lead us to actually shift our beliefs and lives, in order for our society to survive and recover