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The Rise of Fascism in the United States

By Andrew J. Wood
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Ordinarily, I abhor political comparisons to Adolf Hitler and the Third Reich. No matter the similarities with other authority figures, however authoritarian or totalitarian, Hitler represents a particular sequence of events in world history, and this particularity is glossed over in such comparisons. The comparison of public figures to Hitler is often based on intellectually lazy equivalences of evil. Such comparisons often focus on the authoritarian tendencies in all governments in a way that avoids nuance, rigor, and specificity, and additionally haphazardly flatten differences in regime types. This simplistic comparison is especially troubling now, when it has proliferated to the point where not only politicians of all stripes are subject to it, but even professional athletes, actors, and others in celebrity culture are called fascist whenever they do or say something divisive. The critique of fascism loses much of its weight when it is ascribed to anyone and anything that we don't like.

I too am guilty of these comparisons, as a young radical critiquing the George W. Bush presidency, for the far-right, nationalistic militarism seemed to fit in nicely with a wider critique of fascism. As I studied, learned, and grew intellectually, however, I came to see these easy comparisons as dishonest and stifling to the formations of deep understanding of particular regimes and how their power might be resisted. Yet, despite my aversion to what I (and others) refer to jokingly as *reductio ad Hitlerium*, we seem to have arrived at a Weimer moment in United States' American politics. We are quite evidently witnessing a figure running for the

highest elected office in the U.S. who is by every measure modeling himself, his movement, and his rise to power on the populist far-right rhetoric of European fascism in the mid-20th century. This person is, of course, Donald J. Trump.

We must begin to move beyond the media's celebration of the Trump spectacle (i.e. of the now all too common, 'can you believe he said____' variety), and begin to ask the truly difficult questions about what Trump's ascendancy means for us now. Enough with the eye rolling, performed outrage, and funny quips (though each of these may have some value as micro-resistances). We can no longer *afford* to believe either Trump nor the media supposedly critiquing him (while turning a handsome profit doing so), when he pleads ignorant or innocent of the most outrageous turns in his campaign. When Trumpism aligns itself with violence, white supremacists, Islamophobia, Xenophobia, authoritarian rulers such as Vladimir Putin, directly quotes Benito Mussolini for its 'interesting' qualities, demands pledging gestures from supporters, positions itself above the law, and so on, we must categorically reject any explanation that relies on giving the Trump camp the benefit of the doubt by disingenuously calling for contextualization, describes these fascist moves as coincidence, or tries to argue that he 'didn't realize' what he is doing or saying. Donald Trump may say a lot of stupid things, but Donald Trump is not stupid. He knows exactly what he is doing.

An abbreviated list of groups or ideas attacked, labeled, and stereotyped by Trumpism

- 1 Women
- 2 Islam (both practicing/religious and culturally identified Muslims)
- 3 Immigrants (of all sorts, most especially Latino workers)
- 4 Black Lives Matter
- 5 The Media (except for those few that laud—or employ—Trump himself)
- 6 Welfare recipients and the poor more broadly
- 7 China, Japan, Germany, Iran, North Korea, Syria and it seems anywhere else that is not the United States, Israel, or Putin's Russia
- 8 Any and all political and ideological opponents
- 9 The "establishment," except it seems the established military, police forces, prison system, institutions of capital, and so on.
- 10 Political Correctness (and by association anyone who correctly identifies hate speech)

In the list above, we are met once again with a Republican politician who claims to love America, yet seems to hate most of the American people. Yes, Trump is a bigot. Yes, Trump preys upon the fears that are propped up by ignorance, intolerance, and hatred towards the

stereotyped scapegoat. And it is true that this is a crucial component of fascism, i.e. the moralizing of opponents as bad/evil people. Everyone who opposes Trump is bad, terrible, dishonest, corrupt, etc. while everyone who supports him is fantastic, patriotic, hard-working, etc. This type of characterization further emphasizes the us/them binary consistently mobilized by fascist propagandists. But we need to be careful about dismissing these incendiary statements as the beliefs of one bitter white man. Instead, we need to pay very close attention to how and why so many people see something appealing in Trump's message. We need to look at his supporters.

Everything that Trump says and does to gain support is part of a concerted manipulation of demarcations and divisions within U.S. (and really, global) society. Just a few quotes will illustrate the specific rhetoric employed by Donald Trump that draws upon the broad themes often manipulated by fascists, that is, the crumbling declining status of the nation, ultra-nationalism and the need to (often construct and) fight an enemy, emphasis on loyalty and love towards the figure at the center of the cult of personality. I have deliberately limited myself to the very public, documented quotations from the most recent (and supposedly most *civil*) Republican primary debate, as Trumpism loves to deny having made a claim as soon as it is questioned. All I have done is italicize the particularly fascist phrases. I am not the first, nor shall I be the last to call Trumpism a version fascism, but you needn't take my word for it. Look to the themes in Donald Trump's own rhetoric, and you will recognize the overall fascist appeal. These are no mere quips or verbal stumbles, they are concerted appeals to particular sympathies:

NATION IN DECLINE, A BROKEN SYSTEM IN NEED OF REPLACING

"We've lost our jobs. *We've lost everything. We're losing everything.* Our jobs are gone, our businesses are being taken out of the country. *I want to make America great again* and I want to leave Social Security as is. We're going to get rid of waste, fraud, abuse and bring back business."

"I'm self-funding my campaign, and the reason is that I've been in this business a long time and I was on the other side – until eight months ago I was on the other side. I made massive contributions, large contributions to politicians, both Democrats and Republicans. *I was liked by everybody*, which is an important thing... There is total control of the candidates, *I know it better than anybody that probably ever lived.* And I will tell you this, I know the system far better than anybody else and I know the system is broken. And I'm the one, because *I know it so well because I was on both sides of it*, I was on the other side all my life and I've always made large contributions. And frankly, *I know the system better than anybody else* and *I'm the only one* up here that's going to be able to fix that system because that system is wrong."

IDENTIFY ENEMY & THE NEED FOR MORE AUTHORITY

"As far as the families are concerned, and as far as the law is concerned, we have a law – this all started with your question on water boarding. We have a law that doesn't allow right now water boarding. *They have no laws. They have no rules.* They have no regulations. They chop off heads. They drown 40, 50, 60 people at a time in big steel cages, pull them up an hour later, everyone dead. And *we're working on a different set of parameters.* Now, we have to obey the

laws. Have to obey the laws. But *we have to expand those laws, because we have to be able to fight on at least somewhat of an equal footing* or we will never ever knock out ISIS and all of the others that are so bad. *We better expand our laws or we're being a bunch of suckers, and they are laughing at us. They are laughing at us, believe me... We have to knock them out fast. Look, we're not allowed to fight.* We can't fight. We're not knocking out the oil because they don't want to create environmental pollution up in the air. I mean, these are things that nobody even believes. They think we're kidding. They didn't want to knock out the oil because of what it's going to do to the carbon footprint. *We don't fight like we used to fight. We used to fight to win.* Now we fight for no reason whatsoever. We don't even know what we're doing. So, the answer is we have to knock them out. We have to knock them out fast. And we have to get back home. And we have to rebuild our country which is falling apart."

ANGER AT GOVERNMENT, LOVE FOR LEADER & NATION

"People come with *tremendous passion and love for the country*, and when they see protest – in some cases – you know, you're mentioning one case, which I haven't seen, I heard about it, which I don't like. But when they see what's going on in this country, they *have anger that's unbelievable. They have anger. They love this country.* They don't like seeing bad trade deals, they don't like seeing higher taxes, they don't like seeing a loss of their jobs where our jobs have just been devastated. And I know – I mean, I see it. *There is some anger. There's also great love for the country. It's a beautiful thing in many respects.*"

"The Republican Party has a great chance to embrace millions of people that it's never known before. *They're coming by the millions. We should seize that opportunity. These are great people. These are fantastic people. These are people that love our country.* These are people that want to see America be great again. These are people that will win us the election and win it easily. These are people that once the election is won will be able to put Supreme Court justices up that will do a fabulous job. Because let me tell you, *if we lose this election...It will take centuries to recover.* So I just say embrace these millions of people that now for the first time ever love the Republican Party. *And unify. Be smart and unify.*"

What the quotes above show is not someone who is *simply* a narcissist, a media spectacle (though I would argue NOT an incompetent), or a bully, though Donald Trump is undoubtedly all of those. Instead, they reveal a scheming mind, attuned very well to the ways in which hatred and intolerance can be manipulated. Remember, Trump is an entertainer, and has spent his life building his brand—i.e. himself—and selling his ideas to investors (many of whom were far worse off for it), as well as television audiences. He not only says these things, and to the dismay of many can afford to live in a consequence free environment where he gets away with saying them—but immediately attacks those who criticize him for doing so, or voice a differing opinion, or happen to point out the flaws or concerns—logic, continuity, sensitivity—in his position. So where is the appeal? Are all initiates of Trumpism simply stupid? This is not the case at all, and we must cease the arrogant dismissal of this base of support. Germany in the Weimar years was a beacon of educational, scientific, and philosophic excellence, yet this highly erudite population also succumbed to the rise of fascism. The entire second half of 20th century theory and social science attempted to explain how this society that seemed so advanced on so many levels could still fall in line with goose-stepping morons. Unfortunately, a key feature of American liberalism

is to deny the possibility of such a development happening here. German liberalism made an identical assumption. We mustn't repeat this mistake. We must attempt to understand the appeal of Trumpism to so many, and only then can we more effectively resist it. The fact is, despite what all media pundits are asserting, Trump did not come out of nowhere.

The decades-long implementation of neo-liberal governance propping up financialized capitalism's gambling with all of our money, debt, and value has resulted in catastrophic poverty, wealth inequality, and environmental degradation. This harm has occurred both within the U.S. as well as the countries throughout the world where multi-national corporations have manipulated legal systems to outsource slave labor. Decades of privatization in education and healthcare have produced enormous debt among people seeking not frivolous commodities, but the necessities of life. Decades of rampant militarization, in both glory-seeking crusades abroad and strong-arm domestic police forces, coupled with the exponential growth of the fundamentally racist and gendered prison industrial complex has led to the consistent erosion of rights and liberties, especially in communities of color. I am not saying anything new here, nor do I have the space to unpack how each of these trends has contributed to our current status quo. Others have done this work, so many in fact that the horror of these facts are all too familiar to most of us living in this world. *This* world, not Trump's.

Along comes a spider, a man whose wealth and status, the literal embodiment of privilege, has not only allowed him to avoid the realities of social struggle, but indeed, a man who celebrates the fact that it has allowed him to scam the system for his own benefit. This is a man who makes no qualms about prioritizing his own self-advancement, no matter the cost or social harm, and who brags of his own corruption. This is a man for whom the words 'deal,' 'negotiate,' and 'threaten' are synonymous. Now, he says, he's had enough, and its time he address the corruption that he himself has contributed to in the building of his empire. This man-of-the-people began life in the top bracket of elitism, has only gotten wealthier off the back of exploited workers—including undocumented workers—and is a direct product of the consolidation of wealth to a fraction of 1% of the population. Let me lead so we can all be rich, he says, with intimate knowledge of the fact that capitalism can never make us all rich. But don't you dare question or criticize your leader, for then we shall answer you with insults, grievous bodily harm, and chants of 'USA.' And what type of leader does he promise to be? In point of fact, he promises to be a fascist, defined as a strong leader that emphasizes authority, militarism, protectionism, unification through division, greatness of the nation, and unquestioning loyalty.

Perhaps the most frightening recent development in Trumpism that puts his flirtations with fascism into sharp relief, framing them as more than mere vitriolic similarity or coincidence, is the sudden shift in rhetorical strategy heard during the March 10th, 2016 Republican debate. Suddenly, and seemingly out of nowhere, Donald Trump, the very embodiment of rising levels of racialized, gendered, xenophobic hatred in the U.S., shifted to a language of strength in unification and love. The Republican party should love his supporters as much as he himself does. They should embrace this love, and smartly unify—around him of course. Trump loves his supporters, he says, and now he claims his supporters love him. I believe him on the latter point. The cult of personality only seems to be intensifying around him, as we've seen the fawning over him, tears shed at the excitement of meeting him, the touching of his hair, a willingness to shed blood rather than listen to outsiders, and his own admission that the support and loyalty to him

personally is unbelievable, so militant in fact that as he openly admits, he could commit public murder and not lose his supporters. As a cult leader, he is above reproach, above critique, and apparently so adored as to be considered more infallible than the force of law—or indeed the playing fields the rest of us are subject to. So, with Trump, we've seen nationalism, aggressive assertions of hyper-masculinity, massive and widespread intolerance, stereotyping, and hatred for a diverse group of 'others,' rampant militarism and warmongering, apocalyptic appeals/threats, and now the moralized celebration of adherents and initiates (a sort of moral affirmation of love and goodness) into his movement. In Trumpism, fascism has come to America, and indeed, it is draped in a flag, and waving not only a cross in one hand but in the other that most sacred of all American gods, currency.

What we must begin to unpack, and expend every effort at combating, is the broader rise of fascism in this country. The crucial point, and this aspect of Trump's campaign is only now beginning to receive broad attention due to high profile violence at his events, is that Trump is not one person. Trumpism is led by Donald Trump, of course, but it goes far beyond him. Remember, leaders only have the power that we cede to them, and without his broad base of zealous red-hats, Trump would not be a contender. Whether or not Trump is elected president is in one important way irrelevant. That is, that despite the outcome of this particular election, the seeds of fascism that are being sown now are not going to go away. That doesn't mean we must demonize Trump supporters, but we do need to combat the fascist tendencies that has caused them to support and propel him in the first place. Ask yourself what you can do, and what you can do now. Some of us can write, some can speak, some can teach, and some can demonstrate, protest, and take direct action. In the past, folks have pled ignorance about the rise of fascism in their countries, as if that is an