

What Does It Mean That Donald Trump Is a Fascist?

Makes Good Reading and Discussion for *The Chaosians*: Damien Wilson

Trump takes the tools of dictators and adapts them for the Internet. We should expect him to try to cling to power until death, and create a cult of January 6th martyrs.

By Timothy Snyder

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It was wrong to treat Donald Trump as a series of absences. The standard critique has always been that he lacks something that we imagine to be a prerequisite for high office: breeding, or grammar, or diplomacy, or business acumen, or love of country. And he does lack all those things, as well as pretty much any conventional bourgeois virtue you can name.

Trump's skills and talents go unrecognized when we see him as a conventional candidate—a person who seeks to explain policies that might improve lives, or who works to create the appearance of empathy. Yet this is our shortcoming more than his. Trump has always been a presence, not an absence: the presence of fascism. What does this mean?

When the Soviets called their enemies “fascists,” they turned the word into a meaningless insult. Putinist Russia has preserved the habit: a “fascist” is anyone who opposes the wishes of a Russian dictator. So Ukrainians defending their country from Russian invaders are “fascists.” This is a trick that Trump has copied. He, like Vladimir Putin, refers to his enemies as “fascists,” with no ideological significance at all. It is simply a term of opprobrium.

Putin and Trump are both, in fact, fascists. And their use of the word, though meant to confuse, reminds us of one of fascism's essential characteristics. A fascist is unconcerned with the connection between words and meanings. He does not serve the language; the language serves him. When a fascist calls a liberal a “fascist,” the term begins to work in a different way, as the servant of a particular person, rather than as a bearer of meaning.

That is quite a fascist achievement. Faced with the complexity of history, liberals struggle with the overwhelming volume of questions to be asked, answers to be offered. Like communism, fascism is an answer to all questions, but a different kind of answer. Communism assures us that we can, thanks to science, find an underlying direction in all events, toward a better future. This is (or was) seductive. Fascism reduces the imbroglio of sensation to what the Leader says.

A liberal has to tell a hundred stories, or a thousand. A communist has one story, which might not turn out to be true. A fascist just has to be a storyteller. Because words do not attach to meanings, the stories don't need to be consistent. They don't need to accord with external reality. A fascist storyteller just has to find a pulse and hold it. This can proceed through rehearsal, as with Hitler, or by way of trial and error, as with Trump.

That requires presence, which Trump has always had. His charisma need not resonate with you: probably, Hitler's and Mussolini's would not have reached you, either. But it is nevertheless a talent. To be a fascist and to call someone else a fascist requires a cunning that is natural to Trump. And in that naming of the enemy, absurd as it is, we see the second major element of fascism.

A Leader ("*Duce*" and "*Führer*" mean just that) initiates politics by choosing an enemy. As the Nazi legal thinker Carl Schmitt maintained, the choice is arbitrary. It has little or no basis in reality. It takes its force from the decisive will of the Leader. The people who watched Trump's television ads during sporting events had not been harmed by a transgender person, or by an immigrant, or by a woman of color. The magic lies in the daring it takes to declare a weaker group to be part of an overwhelming conspiracy.

The one thing that is not arbitrary about the choice of an enemy is that it must exploit vulnerabilities. The Trump ads projected a fantasy of Kamala Harris allowing millions of sex-changed foreigners to take jobs from Americans. This touches, all at once, on gender, economic, and sexual vulnerability. We are unprotected and impoverished and will be replaced by something alien. And this is all orchestrated by a shadowy enemy in the background—in this case, a woman of color who knows how to laugh.

The "great replacement" theory is an example of an unoriginal fascist lie: conspirators will make you impotent and bring others to take your place in the world. The apparent complexity of the world resolves itself as a conspiracy, just as the attendant anxiety is resolved by hatred. This works with almost any combination of enemies. It can be a conspiracy of deep-state politicians to kidnap babies, or a conspiracy of Jews to corrupt women. Fascism wins when the enmity summoned begins to tell the story itself.

A fascist marries conspiracy and necessity. Not everyone can tell a spontaneous Big Lie, as Trump did, when he lost the 2020 election. And the Republicans around him did not challenge him. The Big Lie came to life when his followers stormed the Capitol on January 6, 2021. Crucially, he paid no price for that. That made the Big Lie true, in a fascist sense. His de-facto impunity and then de-jure immunity also generated a sense of the untouchable, the heroic.

Trump's presence has always been a co-creation: his and ours. From the moment when he first came down the Trump Tower escalator in 2015, he was treated as a source of spectacle. Because he was good for television, he was accepted as a legitimate candidate. In the print media, he grew through the doctrine of both-sides-ism: no matter how awful his deeds, his opponent had to be presented as equally bad. This empowered him to be both wicked and normal. During every campaign's final months, polling had a similar effect. By displacing policy differences and reducing politics to two faces or two colors, polls reinforce the notion that Trump belonged where he was, and that politics was just a matter of us or them.

What amplifies Trump's presence more than any other medium is the Internet. He is a natural with its quirky rhythms. And its algorithms make the rest of us open to exactly his sort of talky

fascism. On social media, we are drawn away from people of complexity and toward blunt stereotypes. We ourselves are categorized, and are then fed content that brings out, in Václav Havel's term, our "most probable states." The Internet does not just spread specific conspiracy theories; it primes our minds for them. This was already true before Elon Musk reshaped Twitter in Trump's image.

Our engagement with the machine illuminates a difference between the fascists of the twenty-twenties and the fascists of the nineteen-twenties. Back then, the machine was seen as bold and beautiful, a brutal instrument that would return us to our nature by wrenching us from the hold of soft civilization. The Italian poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti had an epiphany after an automobile accident in 1908, which led him to Futurism and then to fascism. For Hitler, the internal-combustion engine hastened a "*Blitzsieg*," a lightning victory. The superior race with the superior technology exterminates other races, takes other peoples' land, and thrives.

We are still driving around using internal-combustion engines, as we were a century ago; what has changed more than our means of locomotion is our means of staying put. When the Nazis dreamed of a radio in every home or a newsreel before every film, they did not imagine Germans motionlessly staring at screens for most of the day, as we all do now. Fascists a hundred years ago liked the male body, physical fitness, and marching around outside. Fascism today involves a masculinity softened by screen time. In both eras of fascism, women were explicitly deemed inferior. If the old fascism depended on a fantasy of accelerated male prowess, today's rests on the anxiety of mechanical inability.

The fascist fantasy traditionally involved a return to nature. The Leader's voice guided us into a competition with other races for habitat. Hitler was obsessed with coming ecological catastrophe, and he argued, in "Mein Kampf," that Germans had to seize land or starve. That was incorrect. But, a hundred years later, those internal-combustion engines and other archaic technologies actually have changed the climate to the point of causing droughts and storms, as we saw during this electoral season. When such disasters occur, today's fascists react as Trump and J. D. Vance did: they blame the victims and the immigrants, and invent conspiracy theories. If the old fascism killed for the sake of a dream of uniting with nature, the new fascism will kill by a politics of catastrophe, a deliberate acceleration of global warming, and its exploitation in the service of the politics of us and them.

A century ago, socialists wanted to believe that fascism was just another sign of the decay of capitalism. And they were right, at least insofar as businessmen then didn't understand that fascism would reshape all of politics and society, and not just suppress labor unions and undermine democracy. Today, though, the point would be much sharper. Trump does not actually have a lot of money, but he pretends to—getting away with that lie is part of his presence. And his close fascist allies, Musk and Putin, are probably the two wealthiest people in the world. The fascism of today is nestled between the digital oligarchy (Musk) and the hydrocarbon oligarchy (Putin). Trump has pledged himself to America's own hydrocarbon oligarchs, thereby insuring climate disaster, suffering, immigration, and even more occasions for division.

The oligarchs bring to our fascism its libertarian entry point: they preach that government is the source of all evil. As we yield to that logic, the hydrocarbon oligarchs drill away at the earth and the digital oligarchs at our minds. A weakened government can control neither, nor can it promise sound infrastructure or the welfare state. In these conditions, freedom is viewed not only as a struggle against the government but also as a struggle against one's own neighbors. The people who claim to want individual freedom are the same people who clamor for mass deportations. America's hydrocarbon and digital oligarchs support this kind of libertarianism; it is social media that guides men (and it is usually men) away from the idea that they are solitary heroes to the conviction that other groups must be punished.

Fascism is now in the algorithms, the neural pathways, the social interactions. How did we fail to see all this? Part of it was our belief that history is over, that the great rivals to liberalism were dead or exhausted. Part of it was American exceptionalism: "it can't happen here" and so on. But most of it was simple self-absorption: we wanted to see Trump in terms of his absences, so that our way of seeing the world would go unchallenged. So we failed to see his fascist presence. And, because we ignored the fascism, we were unable to make the easy predictions of what he would do next. Or, worse, we learned to thrill at our own mistakes, because he always did something more outrageous than we expected.

It was predictable that Trump would deny the results of the 2020 election. It was predictable that his Big Lie would change American politics. It is predictable, today, that he will give free rein to the oligarchs who, he knows, will continue to generate the social and digital bases of a politics of us and them. It is predictable that, in returning to power, he will seek to change the system so that he can remain in power until death. It is predictable that he will use deportations to divide us, to accustom us to violence, and to make accomplices of us. It is predictable that he will create a cult out of the martyrs of January 6th. It is predictable that he will cooperate with similarly minded rulers abroad.

When the historian Robert Paxton was asked about Trump and fascism a few weeks ago, he made an important point. Of course, Trump is a fascist, Paxton concluded. It was fine to compare him to Mussolini and Hitler, but there was a larger point. It took some luck for those two to come to power. "The Trump phenomenon looks like it has a much more solid social base," Paxton said, "which neither Hitler nor Mussolini would have had."

Fascism is a phenomenon, not a person. Just as Trump was always a presence, so is the movement he has created. It is not just a matter of the actual fascists in his movement, who are scarcely hiding, nor of his own friendly references to Hitler or his use of Hitlerian language ("vermin," "enemy within"). He bears responsibility for what comes next, as do his allies and supporters.

Yet some, and probably more, of the blame rests with our actions and analysis. Again and again, our major institutions, from the media to the judiciary, have amplified Trump's presence; again and again, we have failed to name the consequences. Fascism can be defeated, but not when we are on its side. ♦