

FASCISM AND THE AMERICAN WAY OF LIFE

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Fascism has become a way of life. To overcome fascism is not only about challenging authoritarian regimes; it is about changing lifestyles. For fascism should not be thought of exclusively in terms of party memberships and totalitarian states. These remnants of 20th century fascism still exist and confront them we must; but they are only the latest material manifestations of widespread underlying fascist attitudes. A new form of fascism has come into being, one that no longer requires the strong arm of the police state and propaganda ministry to design its policies and implement its programs and pogroms. Fascism exists globally today as a self-augmenting, self-propagating rhetorical phenomena on social media in which consumer and producer blend into one another and become a single, shapeless, constantly shifting social organism whose single-minded aim is the rebirth of a mythic identity that would once and for all put an end to history.

“Make Us Great Again”

There is nothing mysterious about fascism. The motto always stays the same—*Make Us Great Again*. This mobilizing myth is common to all fascist movements. No genius inspires this motto. It is simply fascism boiled down to a formula. Fascism creates an origin myth of a specific Chosen People bound together by Blood and Soil, narrates a Fall when this people were scattered, betrayed, and weakened by the infiltration of Barbarians preaching “tolerance,” and foretells a destiny whereby the Truth is revealed, the Barbarians are vanquished, and through heroic sacrifice they achieve a Rebirth. In every specific instance, of course, fascism appears in different guises, cobbling together a ramshackle coherence out of bits and pieces of dominant fashion, culture, ideology, and religion. But one should not be distracted by such differences. The fundamental attitudes are consistent and simple.

Pragmatically understood, “fascism” does not exist as some fixed entity; it is just a concept that helps us interpret numerous interconnected effects that began to appear together in the early 20th century, shortly after the end of the First World War. Prior to the war, imperialism and colonialism were the order of the day, with the (white) European powers and the United States pursuing with ruthless self-satisfaction the domination and subsequent exploitation of the rest of the (non-white) peoples of the globe. The sudden realization of finitude culminated in a War for the Scraps led by the aristocracy, or a European version of King of the Hill. Fascism, by contrast, sprung from the trenches. Exploiting the new media of the day—radio, posters, cheap newspapers, photographs, and cinema—those who had fought or suffered in the war felt they had been betrayed by the ruling classes, manipulated by secret conspirators (namely Jews and Bolsheviks), and exploited by the opposing European powers. Particularly in Germany, they convinced themselves they were simultaneously the true victims and the true victors, the ones who had suffered the most but also the ones who were a superior race. Fascism was a movement that redirected racist entitlement of imperialism back within its own borders, purging with relentless intolerance all those it saw as threatening or undermining its destiny to global rule. Fascism is what happens when modern communication, military, and bureaucratic technologies are put in the service of self-identified “Chosen People” who feel they must use any means necessary to ensure its Rebirth and beat back the tides of Barbarism.

Democratic Fascism

For better or worse, what distinguishes the new fascism from the old is that the fascism of the 21st century has become democratic. In the time of Mussolini and Hitler, fascism meant mass censorship and the

state control of all educational institutions and mass communication technologies. Only through destroying democracy could fascism attain power.

Today, the networking power of internet and digital communication has made anyone with a smartphone a potential propagandist, and anyone with a social media account a potential propagandee. With the benefit of instantaneous feedback tabulated through Big Data, these propagandists can easily gauge public opinion and adapt their messages to the latest trend. Fascism no longer requires a top-down approach to find recruits. Anyone who feels the need to be Made Great Again will themselves seek out fascist propaganda and follows its cues in everyday life. In real time, fascist propaganda directs behavior and transforms even the most trivial choices, from the choice of holiday cups to one's choice of canned beans, into a heroic battle against Decadence. Fascism becomes a lifestyle precisely because social media leaves no aspect of life untouched. The propaganda of fascism is ravenous; it consumes everything.

At the same time, the democratization of fascism has often had the effect of purifying it into impotence. Fascism is powerful when it can pretend it is something other than fascism, when it cloaks itself in the conventional symbolism of religion, patriotism, and race pride. That is why Fascism came to power in the United States in 2016, by taking the form of what John Dewey called "Economic Man" who could pretend that all the ills of the world could be solved by the heroic mythology of laissez-faire capitalism. But the more this regime adopted the explicit policies reminiscent of 20th century fascism, such as the institution of concentration camps, the explicit appeal to white supremacy, the licensing of *squastistri* in American cities, and the *de facto* creation of a post-COVID-19 death cult, the more that the emancipatory properties of free and open communication created movements of resistance. Consequently, just when fascists believe

they have finally attained power, they will see themselves utterly humiliated under the relentless interrogation of the public sphere.

But fascism will not be defeated because it loses an election. Fascism exists in our attitudes, in our hopes and fears, in the everyday practices that govern our social life. And fascism will always be with us. For fascism grows out of the soil of a naïve and self-centered idealism that unfortunately seems to be native to the human spirit. Dewey referred to this as a combination of anti-naturalism and anti-humanism, the first being a refusal to admit that we are part of nature, the second refusal to admit our common humanity. All too easily our pride welcomes the lie that we are, in fact, the Chosen Ones, beings that are made of different “stuff” than our environment and designed to be superior to the various Others who exist outside of the Chosen Circle. Fascism channels this native bigotry through the techniques of political modernity, but its origin seems more ancient.

Lessons to Learn

The lessons that John Dewey has taught me over the years have been simple ones. First, we become more human when we accept that we are part of a common world. A genuine humanism is also a naturalism, an acceptance and an embrace of our interconnectedness on this earth. Whether brought about by God’s design or through the evolution of matter and energy, we are thrown together in time and space and find a way to connect with other beings through the miracle of shared experience. A *democratic* humanism means a commitment to establishing a political order whereby we acknowledge our collective responsibility to one another, invest in the cooperative means to enable the possibility of growth, and respect the limitations that come with existing in a condition of finitude.

Second, much of our labor in the world comes down to applying the everyday ethic of what Albert Camus called “common

decency.” In an infinite universe, we cannot hope to solve let alone understand the problems of the universe. But in the small horizons of our existence, we can try to extend common decency to those who lives we touch. As Dewey said, democracy is enacted in our conversations on the street corner with friends, coworkers, and strangers—in those moments when a passing word or phrase forces upon us the ethical choice of speaking or silence, of support or sanction.

But the final lesson is perhaps the hardest of all—confrontation with fascism requires something more than just common decency; it requires intelligence. For fascism thrives in ignorance and self-deception. It actively seeks to deny the facticity of the world, the integrity of shared experience, and the existence of other perspectives. But for Dewey, democratic life requires the constant and cooperative inquiry into our common world in order to trace the constantly changing relationships in which we are embedded. For it is only through the act of inquiry that our common world reveals itself to our collective imagination and allows us to visualize our place in nature. Fascism wishes to replace the results of inquiry with stick figure drawings in thick black marker. Democratic humanism calls us to strive to make use of all the techniques of art, science, and communication to picture our complex universe in a way that makes it possible for us to visualize our place in a greater community.