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**HOW FASCISM WORKS: THE POLITICS OF US AND THEM** (Random House, 2018)

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**Note by J. R. Martin:** The author focuses on what he refers to as the ten pillars of fascist politics and how they separate people into an "us" and "them." Some might prefer to call these pillars political techniques of far-right nationalism, or ultra-nationalism of some variety such as ethnic, religious, or cultural. However, whatever we call them, all of the techniques described in this book are used by Donald Trump and his supporters. Note also that fascism is a controversial topic and there have been many versions of fascism on both the left and the right (See Rosenfeld and Weber summaries below).

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## INTRODUCTION

In the 1920s and 30s Lindbergh's views against immigration (particularly non-Europeans) were shared by many Americans. The America First movement was the face of pro-fascist sentiment in the United STATES at that time. The immigration Act of 1924 strictly limited immigration into the U.S. and was intended to restrict both nonwhites and Jews.

In 2016 Donald Trump revived the "America First" slogan and pursued travel bans on immigration singling out Arab countries. He also promised to deport millions of nonwhite undocumented workers from the U.S. and to end legislation protecting their children. Trump's campaign also referred to a vague point in history to "Make America Great Again." From 2016 comments by Steve Bannon, that point appears to be the 1930s when the U.S. had the most sympathy for fascism.

The author chose the label "fascism" to represent the various types of ultra nationalism, (e.g., ethnic, religious, cultural) that are guided by an authoritarian leader. The main emphasis of the book is on how fascist tactics are combined into a mechanism to achieve power. Fascist political strategies include: the mythic past, propaganda, anti-intellectualism, unreality, hierarchy, victimhood, law and order, sexual anxiety, appeals to the heartland, and the dismantling of public welfare and unity.

One of the dangers of fascist politics is the way it dehumanizes various segments of the population leading to the justification of inhumane treatment from repression of freedom to mass imprisonment and in some cases mass extermination. It should concern all Americans that Trump has explicitly insulted and attempted to dehumanize immigrant groups.

A most obvious symptom of fascist politics is division to separate the population into "us" and "them." The politics of division can appeal to ethnic, religious, or racial distinctions to shape ideology and policy.

Fascist justify their ideas by creating a mythic past to support their view of the present. This is accomplished by twisting ideals through propaganda and promoting anti-intellectualism that leads to a state of non-reality where conspiracy theories and fake news replace reasoned debate. Fascist ideology can then naturalize group difference providing the appearance of a hierarchy of human worth. Minority groups produce feelings of victimhood among the dominant population. Law and order politics follows when "us" lawful citizens are victimized by "them" lawless, lazy criminals who pose an existential threat to the nation by

exploiting our welfare system. Sexual anxiety is also a typical component of fascist politics where the patriarchal hierarchy is threatened by a growing gender equity. Fascist politicians also view labor unions as corrupt institutions. Each fascist tactic builds on all the others.

In 1948 the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (lead by Eleanor Roosevelt) affirmed the dignity of every human being. It was a liberal democratic understanding of personhood to include the entire world community binding all nations and cultures to a shared commitment to value the equality of every person. It affirmed the right of every person to seek asylum. But refugees are again on the road everywhere and their plight reinforces fascist propaganda that the nation is under siege.

## **1. The Mythic Past**

The purpose of developing a mythic past in fascist politics is to harness the emotion of nostalgia to the central tenets of fascist ideology, e.g., authoritarianism, hierarchy, purity, and struggle. The mythic past can be religiously pure, racially pure, culturally pure, or all of the above, but it has a common structure. It is designed with an extreme version of the patriarchal family, a time of glory of the nation with able-bodied loyal warriors whose wives were at home raising the next generation.

These myths become the basis of the nation's identity under fascist politics. They are usually based on fantasies of nonexistent uniformity with traditions of small towns that have not been polluted by the liberal decadence of cities. The past invariably involves traditional patriarchal gender roles, and authoritarian hierarchical ideology. The mythic past exist to help change the present.

Using the patriarchal family, the leader of the nation is analogous to the father of his nation. His authority derives from his strength. Gender roles are supported with reference to history. In European cultures (except for Jewish societies and some gypsy groups) women were traditionally regarded as property.

After Donald Trump made harshly demeaning comments about women in 2016, Mitt Romney (the Republican Party's 2012 presidential nominee) and Paul Ryan (Republican Speaker of the House) criticized Trump's comments, but their remarks described women in terms of subordinate roles in families as wives and daughters or objects of reverence. This shows that the patriarchal family in fascist politics is embedded in a larger narrative related to national traditions.

Fascist politics is a politics of hierarchy where in the United States white supremacy demands and implies a perpetual hierarchy that replaces reality by power. Convincing a population that they are rightfully exceptional is convincing them of a monstrous lie.

It is typical for fascist to develop a country's history as a narrative concocted by liberal elites to victimize the people of the true nation. Fascist politics repudiates dark moments of a nation's history. For example, in 2018 the Polish parliament passed a law making it illegal to suggest that Poland was responsible for any of the atrocities committed during the Nazi occupation of Poland. In France, the role of French police in rounding up French Jews to be sent to Nazi death camps was also covered up so that French children could be proud of being French again.

In the U.S. a mythologized history of a heroic Southern past was written with the horrors of slavery de-emphasized. Trump denounced the task of connecting this past to slavery as an attempt to victimize white Americans for celebrating their heritage. The U.S. narrative of the Reconstruction following the Civil War is another false history. Black men were allowed to vote after the war until Southern whites enacted laws that had the practical effect of banning black citizens from voting. The myth described this as necessary because black citizens were unable to self-govern. W.E.B. Du Bois's 1935 work, *Black Reconstruction* provides a refutation of the official history of the Reconstruction.

When the fascist politicians do not invent a past they instead cherry-pick the past avoiding anything that would diminish the nation's glory. However, honest debate about what a country should do, or what policies it should adopt needs a common basis of reality including its own past. Advancing a false narrative for political gain is transforming history into propaganda.

## **2. Propaganda**

Propaganda is used by fascist to conceal their problematic goals by masking them with ideals that are widely accepted. Richard Nixon's "war on crime" provides a good example. Nixon used the rhetoric of "law and order" to conceal a racist political agenda. According to H. R. Haldeman (Nixon's chief of staff) Nixon said, "You have to face the fact that the whole problem is really the blacks."

"Draining the swamp" is another frequent fascist tactic where publicizing false charges of corruption by the opposition is claimed while engaging in corrupt practices themselves. The fabricated charges of corruption that led to the end of

Reconstruction provides a good example. The main argument was that poor white men were ruling and taxing rich men. The negro was named as the main cause of the corruption. When women attain positions of political power, or when Muslims, blacks, Jews, or homosexuals share the public goods of a democracy such as healthcare, that is perceived as corruption. Using anticorruption to mask their own corruption is a hallmark strategy of fascist propaganda.

Fascist politicians focus on dismantling the rule of law to replace it with the dictates of individual rulers. This includes harsh criticisms of an independent judiciary (e.g., accusations of bias) to replace independent judges with judges who will use the law as a way to protect the interest of the fascist ruler. In this way fascist politicians attack and diminish the institutions that would otherwise be expected to check fascism.

As fascist are attacking the rule of law they claim to protect freedom and individual liberties. A famous Fourth of July speech by Frederick Douglass in 1852 provides a classic fascist ideology with a hierarchy of value between the races. Douglass called out the hypocrisy of a country that practices human slavery while celebrating their country as the beacon of liberty. The native population, as well as the imported enslaved population from Africa were not suitable recipients of liberty. The Southern states instead used the concept of liberty to defend the practice of slavery by calling for "states rights."

Book 8 of *The Republic* argues that democracy is a self-undermining system with ideals that lead to its own demise. One of these ideals is freedom of speech, and fascist use this ideal to subvert others' speech. Free speech in a democracy facilitates public discourse about policy, but denouncing protest by insulting others is not what free speech is meant to protect. The author refers to a 2017 case where a man engaged in anti-Muslim insults involving two young women, and allegedly stabbed three people who tried to intervene. When he entered the courtroom to be arraigned he shouted "Free speech or die... You call it terrorism, I call it patriotism." This kind of speech destroys rather than facilitates the possibility for public discourse.

### **3. Anti-intellectual**

Fascist attack and devalue education, expertise, and language to undermine intelligent debate. In fascist ideology there is only one legitimate viewpoint that should be introduced to students as the dominant culture and mythic past.

Education poses a threat to fascism unless it is under fascist control. Fascist politics attempts to undermine the credibility of institutions with independent voices of dissent to be replaced by media and other universities that embrace the fascist views. Charging universities with hypocrisy on the free speech issue is a common tactic. According to fascist politics, universities suppress any voices that don't lean left by allowing protests against them on campus. Legitimate protesters are accused of denying non-protesters of their own free speech. David Horowitz published a

book listing 101 most dangerous professors in America and created a number of organizations to promote his ideas, e.g., hiring professors with conservative worldviews. The Trump administration pursued Horowitz's agenda by declaring campus free speech a vitally important topic. Horowitz denounced leftist as enemies of free speech.

Horowitz's free speech attacks on universities are not valid since universities in the U.S. are the freest domain of expression of any workplace. Free speech is a fantasy in private work-places where workers are regularly subjected to nondisclosure agreements, and workers can be fired for political speech on social media. Attacking universities for standing up for public reason and open debate is a manipulative propaganda tactic concealed under the cloak of those very ideals.

Fascist go further by denouncing entire areas of study including gender studies, African American studies, and Middle Eastern studies. For example, women's movements and feminism have been described as a Jewish conspiracy to destroy the fertility among Aryan women.

Fascist politics does leave room for the study of myths as fact. The function of the education system is to glorify the mythic past emphasizing the achievements of those who belong and obscuring the history and achievements of those who don't belong. The goal is to instill pride in the mythic past including the hierarchal norms and national traditions. Part of the fascist agenda is to stack schools and universities with teachers more sympathetic to the nationalist or traditional ideals. Efforts to shape curricula to nationalist ends are under way around the world, e.g., Hungary, Turkey, the United States. Fascist politicians reject the value of expertise to remove any requirement for sophisticated debate. For example, climate science is mocked by Trump and his administration.

The fascist goal of oration is not to convince the intellect, but to influence the will. Reasoning does not matter, but emotion does. The goal is to replace reasoned

argument with irrational fears and passions. According to Steve Bannon, ..."Anger and fear is what gets people to the polls."

#### **4. Unreality**

Fascist politicians exchange reality for the pronouncements of a single individual or political party. A fascist leader attempts to replace truth with power making it impossible to assess arguments by a common standard. Specific techniques are used to alter or destroy information channels and break down reality. Using conspiracy theories is one of those techniques.

Conspiracy theories were common in Nazi Germany, and they are common today in many countries including Russia, Poland, and the United States. A conspiracy theory is focused on an out-group target to serve some in-group. Their function is to raise suspicion about the credibility of the target. For example, conspiracy theories are frequently used by fascist politicians to delegitimize the mainstream media by claiming that they are biased for not covering their false conspiracies.

A famous conspiracy theory became the basis of Nazi ideology. Although it was published under various titles (The Conspiracy, or The Roots of the Disintegration of European Society) it indicated that the Jews were at the center of a global conspiracy to control the mainstream media and the global economic system for Jewish interests. Hitler and the Nazi leaders believed this to be true.

Another more recent example is the "Pizzagate" conspiracy in the 2016 U.S. presidential election where leaked emails were said to describe trafficking of young children for sex with Democratic congressmen conducted from a pizzeria in Washington, D.C. The purpose of the theory was to connect Democrats to acts of extreme depravity. It was apparently believed by a man who showed up with a gun at a pizzeria in North Carolina to free the supposed sexual slaves.

Donald Trump became politically popular by attacking the media for not reporting on his "birtherism" conspiracy. As this example shows conspiracy theories are tools to attack those who would otherwise ignore their existence.

Poland's far-right party's conspiracy theory related to the 2010 plane crash carrying president Lech Kaczynski provides another example. Shortly after the crash PiS politicians began to promote the idea that Poland's moderate government and Russia were involved in a conspiracy to down the aircraft and cover up the crime. This and many other related theories were used to undermine faith in the country's

institutions, the government, and the press. The purpose of conspiracies is to cause wide mistrust, justifying measures such as censoring or shutting down the liberal media and imprisoning "enemies of the state."

Another example involved George Soros, an American billionaire philanthropist who has been involved in democracy-building efforts in more than a hundred countries including Hungary. In 2017 Viktor Orban claimed that Soros was attempting to flood Hungary with non-Christian migrants to dilute the nation's Christian identity although there was no evidence that it was true. Orban was simply manipulating reality.

According to Hannah Arendt (in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*) conspiracy theories become important because the masses "do not believe in anything visible, in the reality of their own experience; they do not trust their eyes and ears but only their imaginations which may be caught by anything that is at once universal and consistent in itself." Since people discount their own experience, the fact that the theories are demonstrably false is often unimportant.

Other examples of conspiracies include that Muslims are trying to transform Texas into an Islamic republic (following the theory that Obama is a secret Muslim pretending to be Christian to overthrow the U.S. government). However, the Texas conspiracy was taken seriously. House Bill 45 was signed by Texas governor Greg Abbott in June 2017 to block Muslims from bringing Sharia law into Texas.

In his defense of "freedom of speech" John Stuart Mill said that true belief becomes knowledge only when emerging from the din of argument, disagreement and discussion. However, this view of free speech is based on the assumption that conversation works by the exchange of reasons, where one party's reasons are countered by another party's reasons until the truth emerges. But fascists use language to elicit emotion, not reasons. Free speech works only if the underlying members of society accept the force of reason over the power of irrational thinking. Reason cannot be used to counter language that sows fear, accentuates prejudice, and calls for revenge against members of opposing groups.

Responsible media in a liberal democracy cannot give every opinion serious time for consideration since this would destroy the possibility for knowledge formation via deliberation. They must instead try to report the truth and resist the temptation to report on every possible fantastical theory. This prevents fascist politics from transforming the news from a conduit of information and reasoned debate into a spectacle with the strongman as the star. Fascist politics destroys the relations of



mutual respect between citizens that are the foundation of a healthy liberal democracy.

Two things have eroded the protections that representative democracy is supposed to provide. First, candidates must raise huge sums of money to run for office, and as a result they represent the interest of their large donors. But they must pretend that they represent the common interest and the multinational corporations that help fund their campaigns. Second, some voters do not share democratic values and politicians must also appeal to this group. When large inequalities exist the problem becomes more difficult. Unmet expectations can be redirected against minority groups who are viewed as not sharing the country's dominant traditions. This causes many politicians to exploit resentment as in the Republican Party's Southern strategy against blacks, e.g., forced busing, states' rights, and cutting taxes.

One way a politician can appear to be sincere is to stand for the division and conflict, e.g., openly siding with Christians over Muslims, or native born Americans over immigrants, or whites over blacks. The more important point is that inequality poses a mortal danger to the shared reality required for a healthy liberal democracy. Extreme economic inequality is toxic to liberal democracy because it creates delusions that mask reality, and reduce the possibility for joint deliberation to solve society's problems. To completely destroy reality, fascist politics replaces the ideal of equality with hierarchy.

## **5. Hierarchy**

Most liberal thinkers have recognized a universal human status of dignity that includes the ability to feel physical suffering and emotions, and to express identity and empathy in multiple ways. However, fascist ideology is based on the view that nature imposes hierarchies of power and dominance that are inconsistent with the equality of respect assumed by liberal democratic theory. These hierarchies are mass delusions or legitimization myths that are studied under social dominance theory. There is a human tendency to organize societies hierarchically and fascist politicians promote this to legitimize their hierarchies as indisputable facts. Their main justification is that natural law places men over women, and members of the chosen fascist group over all other groups. The principles of liberty in the U.S. Constitution are considered as violations of the laws of nature.

The Confederacy, like Hitler's Reich was built to defend the principle of racial hierarchy. Fascists argue that natural hierarchies of worth exist and their existence undermines the obligation for equal consideration. Trump exploited the history of ranking Americans into a hierarchy of worth by race referring to the deserving versus the underserving. But the basis given for this distinction is typically hardworking versus lazy, clearly not a valid justification for separating individuals by race. Liberal democracy views everyone as equally deserving of the basic goods of society and there is no persuasive evidence for establishing hierarchies of worth based on gender, race, or ethnic groups.

According to fascists, political equality is an illusion given that nature requires one group to lead and dominate. They argue that liberals and Marxists promote the ideals of equality and liberty to get the dominant group to give up their power. Women's equality would destroy the patriarchal society that is the basis for the fascist myth. Hierarchy protects the patriarchal society, the argument against immigration, and the myth of the dominant groups superiority. The author believes that Trump's 2016 campaign was effective because it came at a time of decline for the American empire. During this period fascist politicians fed off the sense of victimization caused by a loss of hierarchical status. Fascist politicians thrive off the aggrieved loss and victimization that results from defending a sense of national superiority.

## **6. Victimhood**

In 1866 The Civil Rights Act made black Americans U.S. citizens and protected their civil rights. Later that month President Andrew Johnson vetoed the legislation on the grounds that it discriminated against the white race. Today white Americans over estimate the progress that has been made toward racial equality between black and white Americans that is approximately at the point it was during the Reconstruction. The average black family has about 5 percent of the wealth of the average white family. However, there is a feeling of victimization by the white majority of eventually sharing power equally with members of minority groups. This perceived shift to a majority-minority country has significantly increased white Americans perception of a threat to their dominant status, and promoted their support for right-wing policies. Exploiting this feeling of victimization is another useful technique of fascist politics.

A sense of loss of status is manipulated by fascist politics into aggrieved victimhood and exploited to justify past, continuing, or new forms of oppression.

Although there is strong evidence of how the system provides status to white Americans that is not available to black citizens, white nationalist propaganda found no racism against blacks in 2017 America. Fascist cover up structural inequality by inverting it, misrepresenting it, or subverting the effort to address it. Affirmative action was falsely represented as uncoupled from individual merit and a detriment to hardworking white Americans.

Some white men feel like victims because they are misled by a mythical hierarchal past that creates unreasonable expectations. Fascist politicians use this to create a sense of victimization directing it at groups that are not responsible. This leads to attacks on these groups such as anti-immigrant propaganda representing them as threats to public health, law and order, or civilization in general.

Nationalism is the fundamental concept of fascism. Collective victimhood is used to create a sense of group identity that is by its nature opposed to liberal democracy. Fascist nationalism creates a dangerous group of "them" to guard against, battle with, and control to maintain or restore dignity to the in-group "us."

## **7: Law and Order**

This chapter begins with Donald Trump's call for the execution of the "Central Park Five" in 1989. Five black teenagers who were arrested for the gang rape of a white woman jogger in New York City's Central Park. Although they were innocent and completely exonerated, Jeff Sessions praised president-elect Trump's 1989 comments about the five as a commitment to "law and order." Fascist law-and-order rhetoric is designed to divide citizens into two classes, those who are lawful by nature, and those who are naturally lawless. In fascist politics, natural violations of law and order include women who do not fit traditional gender roles, non-whites, homosexuals, immigrants, and those who do not embrace the dominant religion. This fascist rhetoric has created a strong sense of white national identity that requires protection from the nonwhite threat.

National socialism in Austria and Germany beginning in the 1880s provides a good example of ethnic nationalism. The movement was rooted in the notion of the purity of the German Volk where anti-Semitism was part of the definition, i.e., Volk were defined by contrast to the Jews who were the enemy and threats to law and order. Hitler later began by arresting all Jews with criminal records including traffic fines. In 2016 a right-wing group introduced a referendum in Switzerland to expel

immigrants found guilty of as little as a few parking violations. In the U.S. Donald Trump won the 2016 presidency with a call to expel "criminal aliens" and he has continued to promote fear of immigrants by attempting to connect them to various crimes. Fascist politicians who describe whole categories of people as "criminals" assign a permanent character to "them" while simultaneously placing the fascist as the nation's protectors. This undermines the democratic process of reasonable decision making and replaces it with fear. Another twist of law and order rhetoric is to refer to political protest as riots. Fascist terminology changes attitudes and shapes policy.

Black Americans are much more likely to be incarcerated than white Americans even for the same crime (e.g., drug crimes), and the percentage of blacks incarcerated is much greater than the percentage of whites. Locking up blacks supposedly reduces crime, but studies indicate the opposite. Incarceration substantially increases crime rates because formerly incarcerated individuals have much greater difficulty finding employment. Studies also show that incarceration leads to more crime, not less.

Two books published a century apart provide examples of the pseudo science associated with black Americans: Frederick Hoffman's 1896 *Race Traits and Tendencies of the American Negro*, and *Body Count: Moral Poverty...and How to Win America's War Against Crime and Drugs* published in 1996 by William Bennet, John Dilulio Jr. and John Walters. The thesis of the 1896 book is that black Americans are violent, lazy, and prone to disease. The thesis of the 1996 book is that a new generation of mostly young black men are prone to cruel violent acts and are incapable of honest work. These publications and others have contributed to a public culture where black juveniles are viewed as significantly more inclined to criminal behavior than white juveniles. However, W.E.B. Du Bois pointed out in 1898 that the evidence for proving definite conclusions about the tendencies of millions of American Negroes does not exist. But years of racist propaganda has resulted in the mass incarceration of Americans of African descent, and a massive over representation of this group in the U.S, prison system.<sup>1</sup>

Fascist propaganda goes further by emphasizing that targeted groups (e.g., blacks and immigrants) will rape members of the chosen nation and pollute its blood. Using the crime of rape is a basic technique in fascist politics because it raises sexual anxiety and the need for protection by the fascist authority.

## **8. Sexual Anxiety**

The politics of sexual anxiety is effective when traditional male roles are threatened in various ways. These include the crimes of rape and assault, and the fear of interbreeding and race mixing. Transgender individuals and homosexuals are used to increase the threat to the traditional male gender roles. This chapter includes a number of examples of how fascist politics uses the technique of sexual anxiety.

The author begins with German propaganda about the supposed rape of German women by French soldiers from African colonies. According to Hitler, Jews were promoting the use of black soldiers to rape pure Aryan women for the purpose of destroying the white race. This was also a conspiracy theory used by the American Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s.

In the United States, the fraudulent rape charge is perhaps the most significant deception invented by racism. The practice of lynching black men in the U.S. was justified by alleging the need to defend the purity of white American women. Various books by Ida B. Wells countered this narrative of black rapist showing that the majority of black lynching victims were not even accused of rape.

Similar cases of the use of sexual anxiety have been repeated around the world. In 2017 the people of Rohingya suffered a similar fate when hundreds of villages were burned to the ground based on theories of Muslim sexual schemes to prey on Buddhist women. In India, Hindu nationalists have frequently called attention to a supposed threat Muslim men pose to Hindu masculinity, a "love jihad" that compelled Hindu women to convert to Islam by marriage and deception. In 2017 there was a report that Syrian refugees raped a five-year old girl. It grew out of a story in Twin Falls Idaho where three refugee boys aged seven, ten, and fourteen had some kind of sexual activity with a five-year old American girl. It is not clear there was any incident at all, and the police said the descriptions of it on the internet were 100 percent false. At the time this book was published Donald Trump was denouncing Mexican immigrants to the U.S. as rapists, and he continued to call immigrants rapist throughout the 2024 presidential election.

Men who are already anxious about increasing gender equality are easy targets for fascist politics that intentionally distort the source of fear that their family is under threat. The 2016 Bathroom Bill in North Carolina provides an example. The bill establishes that transgender individuals have to use the bathroom of their birth sex. It focuses on the supposed threat that transgender girls are likely sexual predators, and the bill is necessary to protect the women of North Carolina. But fascist politicians view the real threat of transgender girls as the threat to the

fascist patriarchal family. Transgender girls distract from the ideals of patriarchy, hierarchy, and domination by physical power.

Fascist politicians cannot attack freedom and equality to achieve their goals, but they can use the politics of sexual anxiety as a way to undermine the ideals of liberal democracy without being viewed as doing so explicitly. By promoting homosexuals and transgender women as a threat to women and children they challenge the liberal ideal of freedom. Representing abortion as a threat to children, or one religion, or race as a threat is similarly a way to question the liberal ideal of freedom. The politics of sexual anxiety is a powerful technique to present freedom and equality as fundamental threats without explicitly appearing to reject them.

## **9. Sodom and Gomorrah**

This chapter begins with a discussion from *Mein Kampf* related to why Hitler described cities like Vienna as a "poisonous snake." According to Hitler, cities are dominated and controlled by Jews who insult the traditional German culture, and include a mixture of different cultural and racial groups. Pure German values are rural values. Cities ruin the pure Nordic blood with a mixture of others. Hitler said cities are hotbeds of blood mixing and bastardization where maggots of the international Jewish community flourish and cause the decay of people. Hitler's denunciation of large cosmopolitan cities is standard fascist politics. The countryside is considered pure, and the true values of the nation are found in the rural population along with the backbone of military power.

More recently, the attitudes of those living in cities and those living in rural communities was illustrated in a 2017 Washington Post survey of seventeen hundred Americans. Forty-two percent of rural residents agreed with the statement that "Immigrants are a burden on our country because they take our jobs, housing and healthcare." Only 16 percent of urban residents agreed with the statement. During the 2016 presidential election Donald Trump's anti-immigration rhetoric was particularly popular in rural areas. Fascist politics focuses its message on the people outside large cities. The message is a mythical perception that city dwellers are living off the taxes of the hardworking rural population when in fact the typical metro area generates tax dollars that flow out to every part of the state. During the 2016 U.S. presidential election, Donald Trump regularly referred to American cities as sites of carnage and blight, "burning and crime-infested inner

cities of the U.S." During this time cities were at their lowest crime rates in generations with record low unemployment.

Fascist ideology rejects pluralism and tolerance of difference. Everyone in the chosen nation shares a religion and a set of customs. Rural life according to fascist politics is guided by self-sufficiency and not dependent on the state like the parasites in the city. Urban centers are a threat and classic enemy of fascist ideology.

Fascist movements view large families raised by dedicated homemakers as the goal. This explains their obsession with reversing declining birthrates that are blamed on the cosmopolitan population where men and women are less capable of completing their traditional gender roles. There is clear evidence of this ideology in the United States. In the 2017 poll mentioned above the responses of rural and urban residents were very different. When asked "In your opinion, which is generally more often to blame if a person is poor?" Forty-nine percent of rural residents agreed with the response "lack of effort on their part." Only 37 percent of urban residents chose the same response. At least part of the difference in the attitudes of urban and rural residents is that fascist politics represents minority populations residing in cities as parasites living off the honest hard work of rural populations.

## **10. Arbeit Macht Frei (Work shall make you free)**

This chapter begins with a comparison of the Federal reactions to the 2017 hurricanes in Houston and Puerto Rico. Residents in Puerto Rico were left without power for months while Americans who got hurricane relief in Houston justified Trump's differential responses to the disasters as appropriate because Puerto Ricans were lazy and lacked a work ethic. The fascist view is that "they" can be cured of laziness by hard labor. That was the message on the gates of Auschwitz following the Nazi ideology that Jews were lazy, corrupt criminals who created no value. The fascist remedy is to dismantle the state and replace it with the nation where there is no welfare.

American opposition to welfare is derived from a commitment to individualism and an ethic of self-sufficiency. The American attitude toward welfare programs is based on their perception that black people are lazy. However, there is widespread ignorance of the fact that the majority of those who benefit from welfare programs are white. The main point is that fascist ideology uses hard work as a weapon

against minority populations. The dichotomy of hard work versus laziness is used by fascist like law-abiding versus criminal to distinguish between "us" and "them." Fascist go further by attempting to transform myths about "them" into reality with social policy. Refugees coming across borders require state aid and support before entering labor markets. By sending refugees across borders into other countries fascist can create support for their claim that members of that group are lazy and dependent on state aid or petty crime. The author provides several examples of the idea that fascist politics and fascist policy are used together to create the perception of reality.

The history of policing and incarceration in the United States, and the white reaction to it explains how mass incarceration legitimizes negative group stereotypes. Black American men have a 1 in 3 chance of being incarcerated at least once in their lifetime. For white men it is 1 in 17. A person's history of incarceration is a negative credential, or a scarlet letter for employers. Studies show that both race and previous incarceration have a drastic effect on one's employment chances. Radicalized mass incarceration of black Americans is part of a long tradition of justifying the black population as lazy and supposedly unwilling to gain employment. Republican attempts to eliminate the U.S. social welfare state while simultaneously making the criminal justice system more punitive creates the conditions that allow racist stereotypes to flourish so that politicians can continue to exploit fascist tactics for political gain.

Labor unions provide a roadblock to the fascist agenda described above. The trade union is the chief mechanism a society has to bind different groups of people together by providing cooperation, community, and wage equality. Labor unions create mutual bonds related to class rather than race or religion. For this reason fascist politicians attack unions. Fascism requires individuals in a society to avoid or lose connections across differences. In addition, fascist politics is most effective when there is economic inequality. However, labor unions are the best antidote to mass inequality. Countries with high union density have low income inequality (Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Iceland) and the high inequality countries have low union density (U.S., Chile, Mexico, Turkey).

Today, "right to work" legislation forbids unions to collect dues from employees who do not wish to pay them, but require unions to provide employees who do not choose to pay dues equal union representation and rights. The purpose of the legislation is to destroy labor unions by removing the needed financial support. When this book was published 28 states had "right to work" laws with their anti-



union agenda, i.e., to maintain the white racial hierarchy and prevent solidarity across races and religions.

Fascist movements are based on the idea that the division of society's resources should be based on pure free market competition, hard work, private enterprise, and self-sufficiency. Resources should go to "makers" not "takers." Those who do not compete successfully are not worthy of value. Propaganda to represent an out-group as lazy justifies placing them on a hierarchy of worth. Regulations that would protect consumers or workers, as well as protections provided by welfare programs and unions are antithetical to the fascist agenda.

The liberal democrat does not pit "makers" against "takers" in a competition for value. A generous social welfare system unites a community rather than dividing it into factions to exploit. Labor unions bring workers from different ethnic, religious, gender, and sexual orientation groups together to cooperate and bargain for a better deal. Democratic citizenship requires a degree of empathy, insight, and kindness that demands a great deal from all of us. Unfortunately, the pull of fascist politics is powerful, particularly under conditions of stark economic inequality that create an environment conducive to fascist demagoguery.

## **Epilogue**

Donald Trump's continuing actions and speech that used to be considered remarkable have real and disturbing consequences because they are coming to be seen as more normal. In the United States we have seen normalization of extreme politics such as mass incarceration, and an increase in mass shootings. Normalization transforms the morally extraordinary into the ordinary. Fascist politics leads its audiences with the temptation of freedom from democratic norms while masking the fact that the alternative is not a form of freedom or a guarantee of liberty. It is instead a state-based ethnic, religious, racial, or national conflict between "us" and "them."

Increased climate change and political and social instability will create a growing global economic inequality and large movements of disadvantaged people across borders. Refugees, including legal immigrants will be treated as racist stereotypes by leaders using fascist politics. From the treatment of the direct targets of fascist politics (refugees, feminism, labor unions, racial, religious, and sexual minorities) we can see the techniques used to divide us. By refusing to be bewitched by fascist myths, we remain free to move in a different direction.

## HIERARCHY

The fates of human beings are not equal. Men differ in their states of health and wealth or social status or what not. Simple observation shows that in every such situation he who is more favored feels the never ceasing need to look upon his position as in some way “legitimate,” upon his advantage being “deserved,” and the other’s disadvantage being brought about by the latter’s “fault.” That the purely accidental causes of the difference may be ever so obvious makes no difference.

—Max Weber, *On Law in Economy and Society* (1967), 335

**T**he history of liberal citizenship—of equality under the law—has generally been one of expansion, gradually encompassing people of all races, religions, and genders, to name a few examples. This is true, too, of political philosophy. Influenced, for example, by theorists of disability, philosophers have expanded the notion of human dignity to include those who cannot under most circumstances employ their capacity for political judgment. In the twenty-first century, most liberal thinkers have included a generous recognition of universal human status and dignity to include the ability to feel physical suffering, feel emotions, and express identity and empathy in multiple ways.

According to fascist ideology, by contrast, nature imposes hierarchies of power and dominance that are flatly inconsistent with the equality of respect presupposed by liberal democratic theory.

Hierarchy is a kind of mass delusion, one readily exploited by fascist politics. A major branch of social psychology, Social

Dominance Theory, pioneered by Jim Sidanius and Felicia Pratto, studies these delusions under the name of “legitimation myths.”<sup>1</sup> The opening passages of a 2006 literature review of the previous fifteen years of Social Dominance Theory include the claim:

Regardless of a society’s form of government, the contents of its fundamental belief system, or the complexity of its social and economic arrangements, human societies tend to organise as group-based social hierarchies in which at least one group enjoys greater social status and power than other groups.<sup>2</sup>

Fascist ideology, then, takes advantage of a human tendency to organize society hierarchically, and fascist politicians represent the myths that legitimize their hierarchies as immutable facts. Their principle justification of hierarchy is nature itself. For the fascist, the principle of equality is a denial of natural law, which sets certain traditions, those of the more powerful, over others. The natural law allegedly places men over women, and members of the chosen nation of the fascist over other groupings.

Nature is repeatedly invoked in fascist writing. On March 21, 1861, Alexander H. Stephens, the vice president of the Confederacy, delivered an address that has come to be known as the Cornerstone Speech. In it, he denounces the principles of liberty and equality enshrined in the U.S. Constitution as violations of the laws of nature:

Our new government is founded upon exactly the opposite idea [of equality]; its foundations are laid, its corner-stone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery subordination to the superior race is his natural and normal condition.<sup>3</sup>

The Cornerstone Speech makes vivid the characteristically fascist logic that liberal democratic principles are in conflict with nature and must therefore be abandoned:

I recollect of once having heard a gentleman from one of the northern States, of great power and ability, announce in the House of Representatives, with imposing effect, that we of the South would be compelled, ultimately, to yield upon this subject of slavery, that it was as impossible to war successfully against a principle in politics, as it was in physics or mechanics. That the principle would ultimately prevail. That we, in maintaining slavery as it exists

with us, were warring against a principle, a principle founded in nature, the principle of the equality of men. The reply I made to him was, that upon his own grounds, we should, ultimately, succeed, and that he and his associates, in this crusade against our institutions, would ultimately fail. The truth announced, that it was as impossible to war successfully against a principle in politics as it was in physics and mechanics, I admitted; but told him that it was he, and those acting with him, who were warring against a principle. They were attempting to make things equal which the Creator had made unequal.

The Confederacy, Stephens declares, is “founded upon principles in strict conformity” with the laws of nature, which are “the real ‘corner-stone’ in our new edifice.” Stephens denounces those who would deny the inequality of racial inferiority as “fanatics” who reject “the eternal principles of truth.” The Confederacy, like Hitler’s Reich, was built to defend “the aristocratic principle in nature,” the principle of racial hierarchy.

In the university, there remain powerful voices who call for “reasoned discourse” about genetic differences between races in such aspects as intelligence or propensity to violence, and in them we find a clear echo of Stephens’s condemnation of abolitionists as irrational “fanatics” for their firm belief in racial equality. In his March 2018 article for *The Guardian*, “The Unwelcome Revival of Race Science,” Gavin Evans describes how “race science is [leaching] into mainstream discourse” via figures such as the political scientist Charles Murray and the Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker. According to Evans, in 2005, Pinker began popularizing the view that “Ashkenazi Jews are innately particularly intelligent,” a view that Evans describes as “the smiling face of race science”; the claim that Ashkenazi Jews are innately particularly intelligent invites the reader to draw conclusions about other groups and their “innate intelligence.” In a 2007 piece for the online venue The Edge, Pinker decries how “political correctness” has prevented researchers from studying “dangerous ideas,” including “Do women, on average, have a different profile of aptitudes and emotions than men?” and “Are Ashkenazi Jews, on average, smarter than gentiles because their ancestors were selected for the shrewdness needed in money lending?” and “Do African American men have higher levels of

testosterone, on average, than white men?” The concern about this kind of writing is that it presents those who seek a natural source for inequality as brave truth-seekers, driven by reason to reject the heart’s plea for equality. This research has proven to be suspect, at best. And yet, the search for the natural source of inequality that Stephens pointed to as fact somehow continues, grail-like.

Fascists argue that natural hierarchies of worth in fact exist, and that their existence undermines the obligation for equal consideration. One sees a valuation of this kind in the words of the many white supporters of Donald Trump in the 2016 U.S. presidential election who regularly spoke of their disdain for supposedly “undeserving” recipients of U.S. governmental largesse in the form of healthcare, by which they often meant their black fellow citizens. In his run for the presidency, Trump exploited the lengthy history of ranking Americans into a hierarchy of worth by race, the “deserving” versus the “undeserving.”

When pressed by journalists to justify a distinction between the “deserving” and the “undeserving,” Americans who use such vocabulary reach in the first instance for the language of “hardworking” versus “lazy” rather than for the language of racial distinction. But this hardly justifies the division of fellow citizens into such categories. First, in the United States, racism has often taken the form of associating blackness with laziness. Such language has always been a code for division by racial hierarchy. Second, it betrays confusion about the concept of liberal democracy to measure worthiness by a supposed capacity for hard work. It is no part of liberal democratic theory that basic equal respect is won by hard work. The idea behind liberal democracy is that *all* of us are equally deserving of the basic goods of society.

Some would argue for the existence of inherent differences between groups of people along lines of intelligence and self-control, and still claim to value equal dignity for all. Nevertheless, history gives us salient examples of the difficulty of believing in systematic group differences while upholding the equal treatment of others. In

his 1920 essay “Of the Ruling of Men,” W.E.B. Du Bois writes about the failure to give women equal voice in the determination of policy:

...women have been excluded from modern democracy because of the persistent theory of female subjection and because it was argued that their husbands or other male folks would look to their interests. Now, manifestly, most husbands, fathers, and brothers, will, so far as they know how or as they realize women’s needs, look after them....We have but to view the unsatisfactory relations of the sexes the world over and the problem of children to realize how desperately we need this excluded wisdom.<sup>4</sup>

Such examples suggest the difficulty of maintaining an ethic of equal worth in the presence of a belief in genetic group differences in cognitive abilities or the capacity to control one’s own actions. No one is forced by a confrontation with reality into believing in these kinds of hierarchal differences between, for example, genders, or racial or ethnic groups. There is no persuasive evidence for such hierarchies, despite centuries of attempts to establish them by religious edict or scientific investigation. Those who strenuously argue for racial hierarchies of intelligence or the capacity for self-control, while denying any interest in illiberal moral or political consequences, tend to be misguided.

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Establishing hierarchies of worth is of course a means of obtaining and retaining power—a kind of power that liberal democracy attempts to delegitimize. On this point, there are critiques of liberal ideals from both the traditional left and the traditional right. Leftist critiques of liberalism point out its supposed failure to account for structural, historical inequalities, in that the practice of liberalism does not typically include remedies for past injustice. Leftist critics of liberalism also argue that the liberal ideals of equality and freedom can be used to entrench the power of dominant groups. For example, it can be argued that ways to remedy entrenched structural injustice—say, affirmative action programs—violate liberal ideals of equal

treatment. Critiques of liberalism from the right have a different flavor. Right-wing critics warn that liberal equality can be used by marginalized groups as a weapon to displace the privileged status of dominant groups and their traditions.

Both left-wing and right-wing critiques of liberalism focus on the fact that liberal ideals ignore differences in power. Leftist critics argue that by doing so, liberal ideals entrench preexisting inequalities. Rightist critics argue that by ignoring differences in power, liberalism makes dominant groups susceptible to having their privileged status overturned by forced, and therefore unjust, “power sharing.” We find the latter critique of liberalism explicit in Hitler’s writings as well as *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

*The Protocols*, recall, is a forgery that is written like an instruction manual by “the elders of Zion,” supposed leaders among Jews, to other Jews, to take over and dominate the world on behalf of the Jewish people. It begins by instructing the reader to “infect the opponent with the idea of freedom, so-called liberalism.” According to *The Protocols*, liberalism weakens the “opponent” (here, the Christian), by drawing Christians into recognizing the equal rights of Jews. If Christians accept liberalism, they will be led to give equal respect and equal recognition to other religious groups, thereby ceding their dominant traditional position:

Political freedom is an idea but not a fact. This idea one must know how to apply whenever it appears necessary with this bait of an idea to attract the masses of the people to one’s party for the purpose of crushing another who is in authority. This task is rendered easier if the opponent has himself been infected with the idea of freedom, SO-CALLED LIBERALISM, and, for the sake of an idea, is willing to yield some of his power. It is precisely here that the triumph of our theory appears; the slackened reins of government are immediately, by the law of life, caught up and gathered together by a new hand, because the blind might of the nation cannot for one single day exist without guidance, and the new authority merely fits into the place of the old already weakened by liberalism.

In the statement “Political freedom is an idea, but not a fact,” the purported authors of *The Protocols* echo the theme of Stephens’s Cornerstone Speech—that political freedom, and hence political

equality, is an illusion, an impossibility, given that nature requires one group to lead and dominate. *The Protocols* suggests spreading the myth of “political freedom,” or “liberalism,” to members of dominant groups. By accepting the myth of “political freedom,” those in power will grant equal status to those who lack it. But since “the law of life,” that is, nature, demands that one group rule, once Jews are granted some of the power by the dominant Christians, they can then seize all of the power from them.

Equality, according to the fascist, is the Trojan horse of liberalism. The part of Odysseus can be variously played—by Jews, by homosexuals, by Muslims, by non-whites, by feminists, etc. Anyone spreading the doctrine of liberal equality is either a dupe, “infected by the idea of freedom,” or an enemy of the nation who is spreading the ideals of liberalism only with devious and indeed illiberal aims.

The fascist project combines anxiety about loss of status for members of the true “nation,” with fear of equal recognition of hated minority groups. For the twentieth-century Ku Klux Klan, Jews were often perceived as the force behind black racial equality: Jews sought to advance black equality in order to dilute pure white blood and undermine the white Christian ethnostate. As the Nazi ideologue Alfred Rosenberg writes in a 1923 commentary on *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, “it is well known that Jews of all kinds pretend to fight for freedom and peace day after day; their speakers drip with humanity and love of mankind, as long as Jewish interests are thereby promoted.”<sup>5</sup> In Nazi ideology, Jews operate with the same hierarchal views of nature as Nazis do but use the universal principles of liberal democracy as a façade to advance it. It is classic fascist politics, as we have seen, to represent the actual defenders of liberal democracy as defending its ideals only in the service of undermining them.

According to fascists, liberals and Marxists (or “cultural Marxists”) advance the ideals of equality and liberty, spreading their ideas as “infections” to members of the dominant group which leads them to willingly hand over their power. In the case of women’s



equality, acceptance of liberal ideals leads to the destruction of the virtuous patriarchal society that is the basis of fascist myth. Lindbergh's America First movement repudiated liberal ideals as leading to the pollution of the "pure blood" of the white nation via immigration. In the case of contemporary Russia, and much of the U.S. Christian right, liberal democracy leads to the legitimization of immigration and the supposed introduction of mass rape by immigrants, and to the acceptance of homosexuality together with its supposedly attendant sin of "degeneracy."

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Hierarchy benefits fascist politics in another way: Those who are accustomed to its benefits can be easily led to view liberal equality as a source of victimization. Those who benefit from hierarchy will adopt a myth of their own superiority, which will occlude basic facts about social reality. They will distrust pleas for tolerance and inclusion made by liberals on the grounds that these pleas are masks for power grabs by other groups. Fascist politics feeds off the sense of aggrieved victimization caused by loss of hierarchal status.

Empires in decline are particularly susceptible to fascist politics because of this sense of loss. It is in the very nature of empire to create a hierarchy; empires legitimize their colonial enterprises by a myth of their own exceptionalism. In the course of decline, the population is easily led to a sense of national humiliation that can be mobilized in fascist politics to serve various purposes. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Ottoman Empire experienced a tremendous collapse, losing more than 400,000 square miles of territory in Africa and Europe, including Libya, Albania, Macedonia, Bosnia, Herzegovina, and Crete. The Ottoman sultanate was overthrown in 1908, and in 1913 the empire was taken over by extremist ultranationalists who preached a vision of a completely mythic pure ethnic Turkish past that was placed in threat by the presence of non-Turkish, non-Muslim minorities (the

mythology here is particularly extreme, as the Ottoman Empire's home of modern-day Turkey was the site of one of the world's most powerful and longest-lasting Christian empires, Byzantium). They were able to exploit the sense of humiliation and resentment and loss of territory to bring about, in the second decade of the twentieth century, one of the more horrific crimes in history, the massacre of the Armenian Christian population of Turkey.

In "Why Now? It's the Empire, Stupid," a June 2016 article in *The Nation*, the NYU historian Greg Grandin argues that Donald Trump's politics is effective in the context of the 2016 campaign because it comes at a time of decline for the American empire. We are witnessing the passing of the era after the end of the Cold War in which the United States reigned supreme in the world as the only remaining superpower. In the article, he argues that an empire gives rise among its citizens to a comforting myth of superiority, thereby concealing the various social and structural problems that otherwise would lead to political difficulties. With its demise, the citizens of a once powerful empire must confront the fact that their exceptionalism was a myth. Grandin writes that beginning in 2008—about when Barack Obama won the presidential election—"the safety valve of empire closed, gummed up by the catastrophic war in Iraq combined with the 2008 financial crisis....Because Obama came to power in the ruins of neoliberalism and neoconservatism, empire [was] no longer able to dilute the passions, satisfy the interests, and unify the divisions."

When imperial hierarchy collapses and social reality is laid bare, hierarchical sentiment in the home country tends to arise as a mechanism to preserve the familiar and comforting illusion of superiority. Fascist politics thrives off the resulting sense of aggrieved loss and victimization that results from the ever more tenuous and difficult struggle to defend a sense of cultural, ethnic, religious, gendered, or national superiority.

## SEXUAL ANXIETY

If the demagogue is the father of the nation, then any threat to patriarchal manhood and the traditional family undermines the fascist vision of strength. These threats include the crimes of rape and assault, as well as so-called sexual deviance. The politics of sexual anxiety is particularly effective when traditional male roles, such as that of family provider, are already under threat by economic forces.

Fascist propaganda promotes fear of interbreeding and race mixing, of corrupting the pure nation with, in the words of Charles Lindbergh, speaking for the America First movement, “inferior blood.” Fascist propaganda characteristically magnifies this fear by sexualizing the threat of the other. Since fascist politics has, at its basis, the traditional patriarchal family, it is characteristically accompanied by panic about deviations from it. Transgender individuals and homosexuals are used to heighten anxiety and panic about the threat to traditional male gender roles.

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In his 1970 article “The ‘Black Horror on the Rhine’: Race as a Factor in Post–World War I Diplomacy,” the historian Keith Nelson documents the mass hysteria that gripped Germany about the

African soldiers serving among the French troops that occupied the Rhineland starting in 1919.<sup>1</sup> German propaganda about the supposed mass rape of German women by French soldiers from African colonies was spread as widely as possible, and included pieces translated into nearly every European language, including Esperanto. The German government promulgated racial fantasies of mass rape of white women by black men as a means of fighting the French occupation. This propaganda was particularly successful in “the racially sensitive” United States. A group calling itself “the American Campaign Against the Horror on the Rhine” ran off ten thousand pamphlets using money “contributed by wealthy German- and Irish-Americans,” and a rally against “The Horror on the Rhine” on February 28, 1921, attracted a crowd of twelve thousand to Madison Square Garden in New York City. Nelson writes:

Likewise, a young German nationalist named Adolf Hitler could not forget the thought that “7,000,000 [people] languish under alien rule and the main artery of German people flows through the playground of black African hordes....It was and is the Jews who bring the Negro to the Rhine, always with the same concealed thought and the clear goal of destroying by the bastardization which would necessarily set in, the white race which they hate.”

According to Hitler, Jews were behind a conspiracy to use black soldiers to rape pure Aryan women as a means of destroying the “white race.” This was also a conspiracy theory shared by the American Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s, which fantasized openly about Jews intentionally plotting the mass rape of white women by black men to undermine the white race in the United States.

“In the history of the United States, the fraudulent rape charge stands out as one of the most formidable artifices invented by racism,” writes the activist Angela Davis. “The myth of the Black rapist has been methodically conjured up whenever recurrent waves of violence and terror against the Black community have required convincing justification.”<sup>2</sup> The practice of lynching black men in the United States was justified by alleging the necessity of defending the purity of white American women; in the words of the historian

Crystal Feimster, “southern white men [actively mobilized] the image of the black rapist for their political advantage.”<sup>3</sup> The South Carolina senator Benjamin Tillman said on the floor of the Senate that “the poor African has become a fiend, a wild beast seeking whom he may devour, filling our penitentiaries and our jails, lurking around to see if some helpless white woman can be murdered or brutalized.” It was not only white *men* whose sexual anxiety and demagoguery about black men led to the horrific multidecade spate of mass lynchings of black American men. Rebecca Latimer Felton was the first woman to be a U.S. senator, after a long career in the public eye, by appointment (for one day) in 1922. A distinguished proponent of (white) women’s rights, she also poured fuel on the fire of racism in her career, going so far as to declare in an 1897 speech, about the putative danger of black rapists, “if it takes lynching to protect women’s dearest possession from drunken, ravening beasts, then I say lynch a thousand times a week.”

The great antilynching crusader Ida B. Wells attempted to counter this narrative in her two pamphlets, “Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases” (1892) and “A Red Record: Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynchings in the United States 1892-1893-1894” (1894). Wells’s findings that the majority of lynching victims were not even so much as accused of rape were greeted with widespread incredulity, as many historians have documented.<sup>4</sup> Whites across the United States assumed that there was an epidemic of mass rape perpetrated by black men on white women that justified the horrors of lynching, because that would make rational sense of the fear and anxiety they felt over the potential loss of status associated with accepting their black fellow citizens as equals. Where sexual anxiety might seem extreme, paranoid, or abstract, there is often a more tangible insecurity lurking behind it.

These fears experienced in the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have been repeated around the world. In the fall of 2017, one of the worst campaigns of ethnic cleansing since the Second World War swept through Myanmar, targeting the Rohingya people of that country, a population of Muslims who do not share the

majority Buddhist religion. Hundreds of Rohingya villages have been burned to the ground, and mass slaughter and brutal mass rape have led to the flight of over half a million Rohingyas to Bangladesh. The unspeakably barbaric campaign of ethnic cleansing against the Rohingya people has its recent origins in unrest that began in June 2012 with the rape and murder of a young Buddhist woman by several Rohingya men. In 2014, rumors on social media of the rape of another Buddhist woman led to more violence. In general, the genocide against the Rohingyas has been fueled by paranoid theories of Muslim sexual schemes to prey on Buddhist women; a 2014 article in the *Los Angeles Daily News* reporting on the situation is headlined BUDDHIST VIGILANTES IN MYANMAR ARE SPARKING RIOTS WITH WILD RUMORS OF MUSLIM SEX PREDATORS. In interviews with experts on Myanmar, the article documents a decades-long history of Buddhist extremist propaganda about “Muslim men scheming for their women.”

In India, Hindu nationalists have regularly stoked anti-Muslim sentiment with campaigns calling attention to the supposed threat Muslim men pose to Hindu masculinity. Most recently, this took the form of a panic about a supposed “love jihad.” In an article in *Indian Express* in August 2014, the Indian historian Charu Gupta calls attention to “an aggressive, systematic campaign,” including “awareness rallies,” organized by RSS and some factions of the dominant Hindu nationalist party BJP, about the supposed “love jihad” movement, which according to the BJP, compelled Hindu women to convert to Islam by marriage and deception.<sup>5</sup> Gupta adds that these campaigns are based on divisive principles that are sustained by “constant and repetitive references to the aggressive and libidinal energies of the Muslim male, creating a common ‘enemy other.’” She decries the loss of “Hindu logical faculties” in the face of a “politics of cultural virginity and a myth of innocence” that are “combined with a perceived ‘illegitimacy’ of the act, leading to rants of violation, invasion, seduction and rape.”

In the United States at the moment of this writing, we also see a loss of “logical faculties” in the face of a barrage of propaganda

connecting immigrant groups to rape. Trump famously began his campaign by denouncing Mexican immigrants to the United States as rapists. In an article for *The New York Times* on September 26, 2017, Caitlin Dickerson wrote about what happened in the small town of Twin Falls, Idaho, where three refugee boys, aged seven, ten, and fourteen, were accused of some kind of sexual activity with a five-year-old American girl. Immediately after the incident, Facebook groups formed about it, with links to articles on the Internet claiming “that the little girl had been gang raped at knifepoint, that the perpetrators were Syrian refugees and that their fathers had celebrated with them afterward by giving them high fives.” Soon thereafter, the headline article on the *Drudge Report*, one of the most visited sites on the Internet, screamed “REPORT: Syrian ‘Refugees’ Rape Little Girl at Knifepoint in Idaho.” The articles were all false—for one thing, as Dickerson reports, no Syrian refugees were resettled in Twin Falls. It’s not clear that there was any attack at all (a police officer, based on the cellphone video of the incident, called the Internet descriptions of it “100 percent false, like not even close to being accurate”). Nevertheless, the fake news stories created a wave of intimidating harassment against public officials in Twin Falls, and a storm of outrage against refugees in the community. In short, they created moral panic about the sexual danger refugees posed for American white girls, a panic that has yet to subside.

The rhetoric on immigration that surrounded the Trump campaign (and continues to surround his administration) parallels the tactics of Russian propaganda outlets, which have spread fake news stories (as well as grossly exaggerating facts) about Middle Eastern immigrants raping white women in Europe. To take just one example, discussed in a September 2017 *New York Times* article by Jim Rutenberg, Russian propaganda outlets tried to create a fake scandal about a supposed rape of a thirteen-year-old girl in Berlin by a Middle Eastern immigrant in 2016. Multiple media outlets produced stories about the supposed rape, stoking outrage among the German Russian community, ultimately to the point where seven

hundred people gathered to protest an event that never occurred. Russian media coverage and Russian fake news stories inflamed outrage. The fact that all of this eerily mirrors the spread of the German propaganda campaign in the 1920s of “the Black Horror on the Rhine” should dissuade us from adopting the view, currently in vogue, that this sort of “fake news” is a consequence of the modern revolution in social media.

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Patriarchal masculinity sets up men with the expectation that society will allow them the role of sole protectors and providers of their families. In times of extreme economic anxiety, men, already made anxious by a perceived loss of status resulting from increasing gender equality, can easily be thrust into panic by demagoguery directed against sexual minorities. Here fascist politics intentionally distorts the source of anxiety. (A fascist politician has no intention of addressing the root causes of economic hardship.) Fascist politics distorts male anxiety, heightened by economic anxiety, into fear that one’s family is under existential threat from those who reject its structure and traditions. Here again, the weapon used in fascist politics is a supposed potential threat of sexual assault.

In March 2016, the General Assembly of North Carolina passed House Bill 2, the so-called Bathroom Bill. The bill mandates that local boards of education enforce “single-sex multiple occupancy bathrooms,” meaning that transgender individuals had to use the bathroom of their birth sex (thus, a transgender girl would have to use a boy’s bathroom). The entire debate surrounding the “bathroom bill” focused on the threat posed by transgender girls to cisgender (non-transgender) girls. Its sponsors and supporters pushed for the bill by arguing that transgender girls were likely sexual predators. The Republican governor of North Carolina, Pat McCrory, justified his decision to sign the bill by arguing that House Bill 2 was necessary to protect the women of North Carolina. Legislators in



more than a dozen U.S. states in 2016 considered bathroom bills modeled after House Bill 2.

Julia Serano explains in her classic work *Whipping Girl* that trans women, because they *choose* femininity, pose a serious threat to patriarchal ideologies:

In a male-centered gender hierarchy, where it is assumed that men are better than women and that masculinity is superior to femininity, there is no greater perceived threat than the existence of trans women, who despite being male and inheriting male privilege “choose” to be female instead. By embracing our own femaleness and femininity, we, in a sense, cast a shadow of doubt over the supposed supremacy of maleness and masculinity. In order to lessen the threat we pose to the male-centered gender hierarchy, our culture (primarily via the media) uses every tactic in its arsenal of traditional sexism to dismiss us.<sup>6</sup>

Since the original publication of Serano’s book in 2007, rhetorical attacks on trans women have moved into the center of U.S. politics. Given the significance of gender hierarchy to fascist ideology, that politicians have been trying to foment mass hysteria about trans women is unsurprising if this effort is understood as a manifestation of fascist political tactics and a sign that fascist politics is ascendant. Conversely, the growing acceptance of trans women is a strong affirmation of liberal democratic norms.

Recall the importance of the patriarchal family to fascism: The fascist leader is analogous to the patriarchal father, the “CEO” of the traditional family. The role of the father in the patriarchal family is to protect the mother and the children. Attacking trans women, and representing the feared other as a threat to the manhood of the nation, are ways of placing the very idea of manhood at the center of political attention, gradually introducing fascist ideals of hierarchy and domination by physical power to the public sphere.

Mária Schmidt is a far-right Hungarian historian who is director of the Hungarian House of Terror museum in Budapest. In an article about Schmidt’s 2017 book *Language and Freedom* that a linguistics professor at the University of Vienna, Johanna Laakso, published online in the Hungarian Spectrum, Laakso describes Schmidt’s

enemies as “Muslim immigrants, left-wing liberal elite, and George Soros.”<sup>7</sup> In the same review, Laakso quotes from Schmidt’s criticisms of Angela Merkel’s decision to admit around one million Syrian refugees into Germany, and the country’s reception of them. Schmidt writes:

A normal man or boy will know his duties and defend his wife, daughter, mother, or sister. Only these Germans of today have turned so brain-washed and unmanly that they are not even capable of that.

Schmidt blames the acceptance of a large group of Syrian refugees into Germany on the decline of patriarchal gender roles in that country. What fills the large gap in logic in this explanation is Schmidt’s assumption of a fascist mythic past before the decline, in which men played the supposedly traditional patriarchal gender role of “protecting” women from foreign influence.

Highlighting supposed threats to the ability of men to protect their women and children solves a difficult political problem for fascist politicians. In liberal democracy, a politician who explicitly attacks freedom and equality will not garner much support. The politics of sexual anxiety is a way to get around this issue, in the name of safety; it is a way to attack and undermine the ideals of liberal democracy without being seen as explicitly so doing.

By employing the politics of sexual anxiety, a political leader represents, albeit indirectly, freedom and equality as threats. The expression of gender identity or sexual preference is an exercise of freedom. By presenting homosexuals or transgender women as a threat to women and children—and, by extension, to men’s ability to protect them—fascist politics impugns the liberal ideal of freedom. A woman’s right to have an abortion is also an exercise of freedom. By representing abortion as a threat to children—and to men’s control over them—fascist politics impugns the liberal ideal of freedom. A person’s right to marry whom they wish is an exercise of freedom; by representing members of one religion, or one race, as a threat because of the possibility of intermarriage is to impugn the liberal ideal of freedom.

The politics of sexual anxiety also undermines equality. When equality is granted to women, the role of men as sole providers for their families is threatened. Highlighting male helplessness in the face of sexual threats to their wives and children accentuates such feelings of anxiety at the loss of patriarchal masculinity. The politics of sexual anxiety is a powerful way to present freedom and equality as fundamental threats without explicitly appearing to reject them. A robust presence of a politics of sexual anxiety is perhaps the most vivid sign of the erosion of liberal democracy.

Politicians, then, turn their attention to the sites of the most egregious and concentrated sources of sexual deviance and violent threats—cosmopolitan urban centers. In the book of Genesis, Sodom and Gomorrah are cities that are singled out by God to be destroyed for their wickedness and sin. There is textual controversy over what sins were said to be the reason for the destruction of these cities. But regardless of scholarship, in the historical imagination, the sins have been taken to be sexual in nature, specifically, homosexuality. Cities have long been treated, in rhetoric and literature, as places of decadence and sin, most particularly, sexual decadence and sin. Sodom and Gomorrah are the biblical reference points for the source of sexual anxiety, where homosexuality, race mixing, and other sins against fascist ideology are most likely to occur.