CHAPTER 2

FASCISM AND RIGHT-WING POPULISM

Similarities, Differences, and New Organizational Forms

INTRODUCTION

Historical parallels between today’s political events and pre-WW2 Germany are a common sight on social media, whether in meme or op ed form. This ubiquity has reached such heights that the memetic concept of Godwin’s Law was created, positing that as a comments thread on an Internet site gains activity, the probability of someone comparing said topic to Hitler or the Nazis approaches 1 (Godwin, 2018). Anyone who brings up Hitler is then deemed as having lost the debate. Initially meant as a satirical way to characterize online discourse, Godwin’s Law has taken on new relevance after the 2016 election, where even Godwin himself acknowledged it was no longer hyperbole to compare Trump, the alt-right, or Bolsonaro to Hitler (Mandelbaum, 2017).

Within liberal and leftist discourse, calls for vigilance regarding fascism and the political climate are ever-present, evidenced by the viral spread of posts such as Lawrence Britt’s (2003) Fourteen Defining Characteristics of Fascism. Even though he was referred to as “Dr. Britt,” Britt himself emphasized that he was not a historian, and had written the list in response to the George W. Bush administration post-9/11. Since then, the list has been used by various liberal and conservative groups to make a point in online arguments across cyberspace, whenever rhetorically useful. In particular, the enduring popularity of this list has taken on a life of its own, often shaping how the left conceptualizes fascism and attempts to confront it, most often unsuccessfully.

Following the defeat of Nazi Germany, it was highly stigmatizing to the right to label its associated movements as fascist. However, since then, much of the right’s activities has moved into the electoral arena, so it becomes less effective to apply the fascist label. As Renton (2019) asserts, it creates an image of leftists as the ones always “fixated on the past” (p. 88). Much like color blind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2018) has resulted in the right wing claiming they aren’t racist because Jim Crow laws have been overturned, it no longer carries the same sting to call conservative politicians and voters fascist. They will just claim they aren’t fascist and accuse the left of hyperbole, often applying Godwin’s Law in the process. Added to this is the conundrum of only 6% of Americans endorsing far-right positions about sexual
harassment, immigration, and Muslims while rightist political parties in the US and globally consistently poll high among party supporters (Renton, 2019, p. 79).

Liberals, in particular, tend to portray Trump and the alt-right as sudden, local aberrations, failing to connect their rise to neoliberal economic policies, replacement of leftist analysis with centrism, and decades of coordinated right-wing messaging such as Fox News (Beauchamp, 2016; Fraser, 2017; Kellner, 2017). Achar (2018) explains that we are now in a period of “fertile ground” where the turn has not been so much toward socialism as much as toward the far right:

The rise of the latter typically happens when traditional bourgeois rule starts losing legitimacy (consent, hegemony) on a backdrop of socioeconomic crisis while the anti-capitalist left is not yet strong enough to take the lead of the people (the nation). As with the “infantile disorder” of radical left politics, the far-right disease of bourgeois politics can take the shape of mass movements, but also engender terrorist fringe activities when the former fail to arise (p. 35)

The election of Trump also connects to similar global events that represent an international authoritarian populist and fascist backlash to the secular dimensions of neoliberalism, with some signs of interest in socialist ideas in the mix (Fraser, 2017). These events include the outcome of the referendum on Brexit, Le Pen’s National Front, insurgent candidates like Bernie Sanders, and Bolsonaro’s victory. Trump is often portrayed as ushering in this trend, but the election of Putin in 2000, Orban’s 2010 rise to power in Hungary, Hindu nationalist candidate Modi’s win in 2014, and Duterte—whom Trump openly admires—illustrates that this series of events extends further back and far beyond the US (Bello, 2018, para. 2). This is the result of new forms of right-wing messaging and organizing, both across the globe and within nations, such as electoral alliances between the Five-Star Movement and Northern League in Italy along with the far-right Alternative fur Deutschland gaining seats in the German legislature.

Because of the prevalence and complexity of concepts surrounding fascism and authoritarian populism, this chapter is organized into broader themes, with a focus on current media and political discourses. After an initial overview of both fascism and authoritarian populism, key similarities between the two will be presented. These include conservative enabling, enforcement of capitalism, rationalizing violence, rejection of liberalism, enforcement of masculinity, and rampant corruption. These similarities are followed by differences that are important to keep in mind when attempting to draw historical parallels between fascism in the past and today. An analysis of new forms of organizing among the right concludes the chapter, followed by a cautionary note regarding the current state of matters.

CONCEPTUAL OVERVIEW

It is estimated that 3.3 billion people are subjected to autocratic rule of some kind, with less than 5% of the world’s population living in what can be classified as a
“full democracy” (Der Spiegel Staff, 2018, para. 6). With this in mind, it should be no surprise that authoritarian populism and fascism make recurring appearances. It is also important to acknowledge the links between neoliberalism, fascism, and authoritarianism, which involve the dismantling of democracy. Miocci and DiMario (2017) assert that “capitalism as we know it” utilizes the same political ideas as fascism, such as the notion of a natural or organic society, limitations of human rights, particularly labor organizing, and privatization/corporatization (p. 2).

Next to its sheer prevalence, what makes unpacking the Right challenging is that there are different factions, which can be classified “in terms of how far each is willing to go in the defense of capitalism” (Renton, 2019, p. 85). These include general conservatism, which is tied more to the electoral system, fascism, and the non-fascist far right, which includes populists of the Trump supporting variety, also working within electoral systems. Renton asserts that each of these factions has specific goals, including maintenance of the status quo (conservatives), restoration of a lost past (far right populists), and counterrevolution (fascists).

Populism is a broad political philosophy that positions “the people” against “the elite,” the elite serving as a catch-all term for often contradictory constituents, such as the ultra-wealthy and minorities dependent on welfare. For Fletcher (2016), authoritarian populism represents “a revolt against the future” (p. 11). Its ideology and discourse are obsessed with a lost past which must be restored. Within the US, this is nearly always tied to white supremacy and Christianity, which presents white Christians as “authentic” Americans, positioning others as illegitimate to some degree and a threat to the restoration of lost values (Connor, 2018; Renton, 2017; Resnikoff, 2017). What is interesting about populism is that its terminology used to be more closely associated with demagogue, but since 1970 the term populist is now used at a ratio of 9:1 compared to demagogue in the Google Books search engine (Connor, 2018, para. 4). Renton (2017) alludes to these demagogic qualities in defining populism:

A populist is someone who says that the whole people supports them. But, no politician in history has ever been universally popular. A populist is, therefore, someone who deals badly with the issue of dissent. Because they are by their own definition popular, therefore any protesters are somehow outside the category of “the people” and since they are not fully human, they are entitled to be repressed. Populists, in other words, are suspicious, vulnerable to conspiracy theory and authoritarian. (para. 13)

Authoritarian populism draws its power precisely from its ability to build alliances with segments of the white left, because it represents itself as defending the common person, along with providing an acceptable electoral outlet for dealing with distrust of elites, fear and resentment (Connor, 2017; Resnikoff, 2017; Renton, 2017). However, rather than leftist ideas penetrating into populism, typically the reverse happens, where followers are exposed to white nationalism, thus “changing the nature of both left and right politics in the process” (Resnikoff, 2017, para. 8).
Indeed, such populist movements have come and gone throughout US history with examples including Andrew Jackson, the Know Nothing Party in the 1850s, William Jennings Bryan’s campaign, the America First movement during the 1920s, and Barry Goldwater’s 1964 campaign (Connor, 2018).

Fascism carries forward the tenets of authoritarian populism, with the aim being a full consolidation of state power and capitalism, including all cultural apparatuses. Theweleit (2010b) conceptualizes fascism as “revolution’s negative image” that “takes the whole living social reality and forces it to approximate an image in negative” (p. 382). This can also be thought of as fascism being about “anti-production,” compared to the “living labor” of human-centered activities (p. 216). The very concept of a fascist state is totalitarian by default, the goal being “to repress and discipline the population, while protecting and promoting capitalist property relations, profits, and accumulation, and laying the basis for imperial expansion” (Foster, 2017, para. 13). This seizure and holding of absolute power are essential components of fascism, with sheer existence being the only justification required to hold power (Theweleit, 2010b). Moreover, fascists are often able to easily maneuver the more plutocratic tendencies within liberal democracies in order to establish themselves (Foster, 2017; Ulrich, 2016).

Even though fascism also draws from authoritarian populism’s notion of restoration of an imagined past in its discourse and imagery, it takes things further with the aim of destruction for the purpose of ushering in a rebirth of a nation and its unified people (Muirhead & Rosenblum, 2018; Ulrich, 2016). The unity of the people involves the illusion of an erasure of social class or political parties, to be replaced with the nation as an organizing construct:

What the fascist understands by the term “unity” is a state in which oppressor and oppressed are violently combined to form a structure of domination. For him, unity denotes a relationship not of equality, but of domination. Equality is considered synonymous with multiplicity, mass—it is thus the precise opposite of unity, since unity rigidly fuses these baser elements with what is “above them,” “interior” to “exterior”…the concept of nation can be seen, then, as the most explicit available foundation of male demands for domination. (Theweleit, 2010b, p. 87)

For Theweleit, fascists contrast themselves against the “mass,” or what “belongs below” using concepts such as culture, nation and race, where “the “individual” carves out a place for himself as the bearer of “culture”: a handful of (male) “individuals” constitute the “few”—who determine and sanction definitions of “culture” (p. 45).

Finally, neofascist ideology, as promoted by alt-right figures like Steve Bannon, represents a troubling blend of authoritarian populism and fascism (Foster, 2017; Renton, 2017). These include acknowledging the failure of neoliberalism, but this is narrowly framed as opposition to corporations or globalization from a nationalist perspective. Related to this are targeted attacks on immigrants and refugees from...
specific regions such as central/south America or the Middle East. This anti-globalization narrative asserts that both China and Islam are expanding to assert global dominance. In response, the United States and the restoration of Christianity are necessary to stem this tide. Bannon sees the alt-right’s rise in the US as the “Fourth Turning,” the other three turns being the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, the Great Depression and WWII (Foster, 2017).

The most dangerous hallmark of neofascism is the global scope of its organizing, which Renton (2017, 2019) discusses in depth. The problem, of course, is attempting to pinpoint the specific moment when liberal democracy, with the assistance of authoritarian populism, moves into a fascist phase, or more specifically, from neoliberalism to neofascism, indicating that fascism may not be as much of an aberration as usually presented (Foster, 2017; Theweleit, 2010b).

SHARED CHARACTERISTICS OF AUTHORITARIAN POPULISM AND FASCISM

This section outlines some of the key shared characteristics of authoritarian populism and fascism while acknowledging there are important differences in degrees of adherence to specific ideological aspects. These include (1) conservative enabling; (2) enforcement of capitalism; (3) rationalizing violence; (4) rejection of liberalism; (5) enforcement of masculinity and (6) rampant corruption. These characteristics constantly interact with each other, making specific boundaries challenging to discuss. For example, free market ideology (enforcement of capitalism) is often combined with appeals to racism (rationalization of violence) in discussing corporate globalization while misogyny (enforcement of masculinity) is used to call for a restoration of a unified, non-secular past (rejection of liberalism). Brecher (2017) notes how authoritarian populist and fascist politicians both “combine charismatic leaders, traditional conservative forces, and multiple forms of political repression” to steer the working class away from a dialectical understanding of their situation (p. 44).

Conservative Enabling

By far one of the most prominent shared characteristics of authoritarian populism and fascism that contributes to the relative ease of their ability to establish power is the enabling of these ideologies by conservatives. Whether considering Hitler’s electoral trajectory or media messaging leading to the Brexit referendum outcome, the utter facilitation by conservatives cannot be overlooked. Conservative enabling happens in three ways. First, conservatives seek permanent political power in any way they can obtain it. Second, closely related to this, is the delusion that “we can contain him/them” which always accompanies the rationalizations of more reluctant conservatives who are willing to overlook all manner of disturbing events in order to maintain power (Brecher, 2017). Authoritarian populists and fascists can often pull more centrist liberals or “undecided voters” into the orbit of this thinking, particularly
during uncertain economic times. Third, this is made possible by a retreat of the left, which creates the vacuum needed for such consolidation of power.

First, as Renton (2019) astutely notes, “If anyone is expecting the mainstream right to be an ally in the fight against fascism, they are likely to be disappointed” (p. 87). Fascism and authoritarian populism have always been extremely useful tools for conservatives to maintain permanent political power. The example of conservative accommodation to the Nazi party platform in order to suppress the spread of Marxism and worker uprisings is illustrative (Ulrich, 2016). Hindenburg paved the way for Nazi rule by invoking emergency powers, making it easy for appointed chancellors to move to a system of autocratic decrees rather than by majority votes (Browning, 2018). It is more accurate to say that National Socialist leadership opportunistically used characteristics of the existing system (put in place by conservatives) to their advantage more so than Hitler being a master of strategy (Ulrich, 2016). This created reciprocal benefits for various conservative constituencies:

The Reich chancellor could now concentrate on crushing the political Left and bringing German society as a whole into line with Nazi ideals without any fears of military intervening. The military leadership in turn had received a guarantee for its monopoly position and was assured that its concerns would enjoy the highest priority within the new government. (Ulrich, 2016, p. 417)

In a similar manner, Trump and his populist coalition have managed to take advantage of Republicans’ desire to maintain permanent power by playing on shared policy goals like privatization, cutting taxes for the wealthy, appointing anti-worker Supreme Court justices, repealing the Affordable Care Act, targeting of immigrants and refugees, increasing the military budget, and voter suppression (Browning, 2017; Sefla, 2017; Taibbi, 2018). This has been further enabled by Trump managing to earn the votes of 90% of Republicans who turned out in 2016, many of whom were uninspired by traditional conservative messaging (Renton, 2019, p. 82). Rather than seeing him as a liability, Republican politicians such as Mitch McConnell have viewed Trump as a clear path to permanent political power and have not deviated from their support, nor are there any signs of this changing any time soon (Browning, 2018; Beauchamp, 2018a; Kellner, 2017).

Second, conservatives and even some moderates and liberals enable authoritarian populism and fascism by maintaining the illusion that either they can contain far-right excesses or that the system will somehow serve as a series of checks on more extreme actions. Hindenburg and other conservatives assumed they could gain the benefits of Nazi party policies to buttress his already eroding support while asserting they could control Hitler at the same time (Browning, 2018; Ulrich, 2016). Thinking that they have a handle on the situation, conservatives fail to imagine the culmination of their enabling, as Groppnik (2016) explains:

To say “Well, he would not really have the power to accomplish that” is to misunderstand the nature of thin-skinned authoritarians in power. They do not
arrive in office and discover, as constitutionalists do, that their capabilities are more limited than they imagined. They arrive, and then make their power as large as they can. (para. 3)

Another way of rationalizing riding the far-right train as far as it will go involves minimizing the actions of authoritarians by continuously moving the bar of normalization until it is no longer recognizable (Gropnik, 2016; Sykes, 2017). Sykes (2017) likens this to conservatives claiming that such-and-such has to happen before we need to act, when “whatever people have said has to happen, has, in fact, already happened, over and over again, and the GOP has swallowed it anyway” (para. 12). By allowing increasingly extreme behaviors, the GOP has now created a situation where there is little to differentiate themselves from Trump. This includes mainstream conservative writers who situate themselves as “intellectuals,” attempting to “impose some coherence and substance on Trumpism” while “attributing to Trump an ideological lucidity that seems little more than a projection of their own wishful thinking” (Heilbrunn, 2017, para. 32). Sykes (2017) holds up the example of Mitt Romney, who is lauded for speaking out against Trump one day, then turns around and eats a reconciliation dinner with him the next, locked in a “relationship of morbid co-dependency” (para. 7).

Even disillusioned voters who once supported more liberal or leftist candidates feel they can safely support authoritarians, assuming that the system in place will protect them or that it will weed out more extreme elements while still retaining aspects of what they want. This was evidenced in Bolsonaro’s election, where Bevins (2018) provides several examples of voters who were against most of his policies, but justified their votes with, “I don’t think he will be great, necessarily, but he’s what we need right now” (para. 18) or the resentment-infused rationale, “I’m against the program to pay criminals in jail even more than I make” (para. 19). Another voter asserted that “he won’t be governing alone, and he won’t be able to do everything he wants” (para. 16). Taibbi (2018) notes how the ousting of Steve Bannon, an action much-celebrated in the media, encapsulated conservative thinking that they had been able to contain the situation when all the while they “overlooked who put Trump in power in the first place” (para. 6).

Third, none of this is possible without the additional assistance of leftists going into retreat, creating a vacuum that enables authoritarians to consolidate power. A major factor contributing to Hitler and Mussolini’s rise were the Communist parties in those countries deciding that social democrats were the real threat, while minimizing the fascist parties as an irrelevant fringe element (Browning, 2018). Instead of banding together to focus on confronting fascism, the liberal and leftist parties fought each other, as Gopnik (2016) outlines:

The militant left decided that their real enemies were the moderate leftists, who were really indistinguishable from the Nazis. The radical progressives decided that there was no difference between the democratic left and the totalitarian
right and that an explosion of institutions was exactly the most thrilling thing imaginable. (para. 6)

While the left was divided, conservatives and other right-wing parties united, a situation that seems to be playing out today in a similar manner (Browning, 2018). When the left faced continual defeat, they “withdrew, demoralized, into private niches,” while “those sections of the middle classes that had previously kept their distance hastened to embrace the National Socialists, with flags flying” (Ulrich, 2016, p. 431).

The retreat of the left today has manifested itself in different ways, such as electoral shifts among the working-class turning to nationalist political parties who hold out economic promises wrapped in racist discourse (Der Spiegel Staff, 2018; Alfonso, 2017). Another manifestation is that rather than directly confronting authoritarian tendencies in government, liberal parties “default to bureaucratic mode,” as if existing laws will somehow serve as a deterrent to future actions (Gessen, 2017, para. 9). A prime example of this was the outcome of the much-anticipated Mueller report, which rationalized not taking action against Trump for obstruction of justice by citing existing Department of Justice policy that a sitting president could not be indicted (Waas, 2019). Centrists also enabled Bolsonaro’s rise by supporting the impeachment of Rousseff and soon found themselves quickly engulfed by a miniscule political party that backed Bolsonaro (Bevins, 2018). Ultimately, the space created by leftist retreat is also an outcome of conservative enabling of fascism and authoritarian populism:

Today, it’s self-evident that we have a failed liberalism (neoliberalism) wherein the system politicians have lost legitimacy and are increasingly hated…And it is precisely at such a moment, when the liberal and conservative bourgeois order is increasingly unstable and untenable, that fascism becomes a clear and present danger. (Draitser, 2017, para. 28)

Enforcement of Capitalism

Despite the ever-present use of “common man” discourse and promises of “overturning the system” or “draining the swamp,” fascists and authoritarian populists are all about enforcing the capitalist system, though it is a more nuanced relationship than is often portrayed by the left. The irony is that many of their preferred policies are destabilizing for capitalism, such as deportation of immigrants and nationalist positions on trade. Davidson (2017) captures this contradiction:

Here we see emerging a symbiotic relationship between one increasingly inadequate regime response to the problems of capital accumulation and another increasingly extreme response to the most irrational desires and prejudices produced by capital accumulation. (p. 63)
For Davidson, the right wing as a collective uses three approaches to capitalism: direct support, backing ideologies that support capitalism, or destabilization, either intentional or unintentional. This played out in the case of Nazi Germany where capital was needed to enact the National Socialist vision. Yet capitalists themselves didn’t require anti-Semitism, but were fine with its utilization in their efforts to control labor. Put simply, “German capitalism did not need Auschwitz, but it needed the Nazis, who needed Auschwitz” (p. 64).

Authoritarian populists and fascists share three aspects of capitalist enforcement in its ideology and policies. The first includes having a solidly middle-class base, with parts of the working class drawn in. This, in turn, impacts the type of discourse used to gain support for such policies. A second aspect is messaging around the mythology of individualism and the free market, though within a collectivist authoritarian context, or “explaining collective events by the initiative of individuals” (Sartre, 1976, p. 26). Finally, the third way capitalist enforcement occurs is through the suppression of labor, such as targeting dialectical organizational strategies like unions. This represents a delicate balancing act, as Kimmel (2017) outlines:

The extreme Right faces the difficult cognitive task of maintaining their faith in America and in capitalism and simultaneously providing an analysis of an indifferent state, at best, or an actively interventionist one, at worst, and a way to embrace capitalism, despite a cynical corporate logic that leaves them, often literally, out in the cold. (p. 254)

First, middle class support, in addition to support of the wealthy is a universal trait of authoritarian movements, whether in Brazil, India, or the US (Bevins, 2018; Bello, 2018; Renton, 2017). The strongest support for the Nazi party came not from the working-class, who were more likely to reject their messaging, but from the middle-class (Ulrich, 2016). Much of this middle-class support involves a fundamentally irresolvable contradiction, as Daher (2017) outlines concerning the growth of rightist Islamic movements:

Just like the petty bourgeoisie in general, Islamic fundamentalist organizations are pulled in two directions—toward rebellion against existing society and toward compromise with it. Either way, their reactionary project offers no solution to sections of the peasantry and working class that are attracted by it. (p. 96)

This contradiction is stark within the US, where one of strongest segments of Trump’s middle-class support is represented by police unions, including the Border Patrol (Myerson, 2017).

The mobilization of middle-class support involves presenting their position as being squeezed by both the “ruling elite” or “global corporatists (often liberal, secular) and the undeserving poor (those on welfare, ethnic scapegoats) (Daher, 2017). The middle class is an ideal target for authoritarian messaging during economic crises.
because they typically have some degree of prosperity compared to the rest of the working class, and they often have accompanying defensive beliefs emerging out of fear of loss of status (Sartre, 1976). Fascists and authoritarian populists will play on the fears of the middle class as losing their way of life at the hands of the government, who enact preferential policies for minorities and other “deadbeats” (Ulrich, 2016). Aware of this, some fascist programs promise voters a social safety net, but only through welfare chauvinism, with benefits limited to the native (usually white) population (Bello, 2018; Resnikoff, 2017). In the US, this is similar to Trump supporting subsidies for farmers, but cuts for food stamp recipients.

Second, though varying in storytelling structure, capitalism is enforced by a prominent free market messaging. Ulrich (2016) recounts how the Nazis did not fundamentally alter existing capitalist structures but simply re-interpreted capitalist relations where “men’s social existence was not to determine their consciousness, as Marxist teaching had it: their consciousness was to determine their social being” (p. 536). Labor was presented instead as a way to earn dignity in support of a larger social project rather than a way for workers to organize together. This ideological re-alignment was necessary in order to defeat the Marxist parties standing in the way of the National Socialists. In the end, however, nothing approaching significant change was ever accomplished, even though Nazi propaganda could convey “a feeling of social equality” with Hitler as “messianic savior” (p. 545). Similarly, Trump presents himself as a populist opponent of global trade, when what he and his supporters reject are the multicultural/global aspects of neoliberalism, not capitalism itself (Fraser, 2017).

Free enterprise is also presented as a pure vision that has been tainted by globalization and corporatization, which explains the fetishization of the small business owner in much nationalist and white supremacist discourse (Kimmel, 2017; Stan, 2017). This has been facilitated by the failure of neoliberalism to fulfill its promises of financial growth and stability in the face of “social dislocation, rapid demographic changes, a decline in the life expectancy of white women, and the election of America’s first black president” which “added spark and fuel to…a whitelash” (Resnikoff, 2017, para. 26). In many ways, the rejection of neoliberalism has not translated to leftist critique so much as attracting voters to white nationalism. Within the US, figures like Steve Bannon promote deconstructing the administrative state, deregulation, tariffs (even though there is not enough manufacturing infrastructure to offset costs), and isolationism in a quest to obtain the purest essence of capitalism, even though this vision totally overlooks capitalism’s global nature (Stan, 2017).

Third, the enforcement of capitalism also requires suppression of labor, either overtly, as through legislation or violence against unions or more indirectly, through insisting on sacrifice or in promoting the idea of workers being entitled to their position. Fascists are often associated with overt violent acts against leftists and workers, but usually those measures are not necessary. Instead, various carrot and stick strategies can be used, such as eroding worker solidarity with the promise of even greater fulfillment to come (Ulrich, 2016). In particular, fascists will often
invoke the idea of there being no meaningful differences between social classes and therefore no need for labor unrest so long as everyone gets behind the vision (Theweleit, 2010b).

Theweleit (2010b) points out how higher-ranking Nazis commonly insisted on workers making sacrifices, but this only referred to those beneath the top strata. An interesting psychology then takes place among the crowd who is expected to make continual sacrifices for the nation:

The audience listening to the man above the crowd must surely sense his absolute unwillingness to make sacrifices of his own. For this very reason, they follow him gladly, in the hope that remaining with him will bring deliverance. What he means when he says, “We must all make sacrifices” is always “We (the group to which I belong) must stand fast together and sacrifice others.” (p. 92)

To pull off this major feat of false consciousness by breaking apart worker solidarity, authoritarian populists and fascists often dress their discourse up in leftist trappings by defending entitlement programs that have mostly white recipients, invoking nationalism by promising to bring back American jobs, or deporting immigrants (Alfonso, 2017). This enables capitalists to gain the support of the very workers who they are actively harming. However, the ultimate outcome remains the suppression of the greatest impediment to authoritarianism: a united working class who rejects racism and sexism (Foster, 2017).

Rationalizing Violence

To varying degrees, both fascism and authoritarian populism make ready use of violent and eliminationist rhetoric and actions (Bello, 2018; Stan, 2017). Further, these ideologies provide several justifications for violence, often portraying the proponents of such violence as victims in an attempt to project blame and establish false equivalences between racist protest and when oppressed groups protest (Wise, 2016). The core motivating force behind this violence is sheer revenge and there is no limit to its size and scope:

Fascist revenge is vast and expansive; it devastates the earth and annihilates human beings by the millions. Fascism may not have offered “justice” to the masses, but it did offer them the power to take revenge…these forms should be seen instead as orchestrating direct incursion by the fascist macromasses into the part of the earth which the fascists—quite simply by their own existence—considered their own. (Theweleit, 2010b, p. 367)

For Theweleit, fascists simultaneously occupy a position of self-assertion and allegiance to systems that require absolute compliance—they feel the illusion of power but only within the limits of hierarchy. Further, the delicate balance between legitimate and illegitimate violence often means that authoritarians, such as Putin
and Duterte, will delegate more overt forms of repression to vigilantes in law enforcement (Gessen, 2017).

The authoritarian populist and fascist rationalization of violence (whether actual or discursive) shares three characteristics, the first being deployment of racism and xenophobia in support of ethnocentrism, cultural superiority, and nationalism (Bello, 2018; Mishra, 2018). A second characteristic is the prioritizing of emotion and feeling over material reality. This is closely linked to the third characteristic, freedom from the responsibility of one’s actions, or permission to oppress others. Taken together, far from perceiving themselves as repressed or limited under authoritarian regimes, violence provides an intoxicating, freeing experience for supporters who seek power at all costs:

When Richard Spencer argues that America belongs to whites because “we conquered this continent” and no matter how bloody the process, ultimately “we won,” he reduces all complex moral and philosophical arguments, both for his side and against it, to a simple equation of “might makes right.” At that point, winning itself becomes the only necessary and sufficient standard upon which to rest a claim to power of any kind. (Wise, 2016, para. 10)

The first characteristic of both authoritarian populism and fascism’s rationalizing of violence involves the construction of a nationalist identity through the use of racism (targeting minority groups) and xenophobia (attacks on immigrants and refugees). Both racism and xenophobia serve to reinforce the cultural superiority of “real” citizens as compared to those who don’t belong, as a way to cement national identity. It doesn’t matter if these concepts are rooted in reality; what matters is the creation of such an ideal (Ulrich, 2016). This is often done through utilizing metaphors of purity juxtaposed against contamination, such as Hitler’s positioning of the Jews as parasitic or Hindu supremacists in India using pseudoscience to justify different castes (Mishra, 2018). Rather than being an aberration, the agendas of many of the leaders and political parties associated with authoritarian populism and fascism have long been building their rhetoric and actions to this global convergence (Resnikoff, 2017). More recent examples of this are Trump’s false equivalence between the actions of racists and protestors at the Charlottesville march and his pardoning of former Arizona sheriff Joe Arpaio (Gessen, 2017).

In terms of racism, state-sanctioned violence by police against minorities serves as an overt way to intimidate communities, as well as create an association in whites’ minds between crime and certain minority groups readily distributed by the media (Giroux, 2016; Stan, 2017). Trump’s initial appointment of Jeff Sessions as attorney general reinforced this messaging. Even when limited to discursive violence, phrases such as “America first” and “make America great again” directly invoke intentions to do whatever it takes to force minorities to submit to white supremacy (Sefla, 2017). Assertions about criminality and immigrants are not borne out sociologically, but the point of such propaganda is to leave just the smallest shred of doubt (Hamilton, 2016). Additionally, older anti-Semitic conspiracy theories are often woven into
anti-immigrant discourse, as in the case with Trump and his followers constantly invoking George Soros or “international banks” being connected to Mexican investors who were supporters of Hillary Clinton’s campaign (Kellner, 2017).

Particular targets also include immigrants from Muslim countries as well as Muslim citizens within European countries and the US. Beauchamp (2018) provides the example of Hungary, where Orbán presents himself as the only barrier between citizens and being taken over by Muslims, even though only a fraction of the Hungarian population was born in another country. Because of its location, Hungary is often a stop for migrants due to its EU membership, a situation that Orbán exploits to stoke fear in his supporters. This islamophobia is reflected in Trump’s administrative pick of John Bolton, who advocates the “clash of civilizations” thesis between the West and the Middle East (Giroux, 2016). Other examples include the France’s National Front, the Northern League in Italy, UKIP in Britain, Wilder’s Party for Freedom in the Netherlands, and the Finns Party, all who use racist and xenophobic messaging to advocate the restriction of non-European immigrants (Alfonso, 2017; Resnikoff, 2017). These leaders and political parties advocate solutions such as border walls, deportations, and the construction of detention centers to house immigrants and refugees.

Smith and Hanley’s (2018) analysis of the motivations of Trump supporters reveal important findings regarding the relationship to race. The authors find that Trump’s predominantly white base, “is more readily found among voters who want domineering and intolerant leaders than among voters of any class background” (p. 197). Attitudes regarding authoritarian leadership were the primary forms of distinction between those who voted for Trump and those for other candidates. Additionally, these voters more strongly agreed that whites were discriminated against when minorities received benefits they felt should be theirs, what the researchers call the perception of “line cutting”: “The defiant wish for a domineering and impolitic leader, which is strongest among Trump’s most fervent supporters, coalesces here with the wish for a reversal of what his base perceives as an inverted moral and racial order” (p. 198). This goes beyond simple racial resentment into a desire to reassert the principles of white dominance, a wish that Trump appears to promise to fulfill.

This leads into the prioritizing of emotions and perceptions over experience or reason, the second characteristic involved with rationalizing violence. As Theweleit (2010a) explains regarding the affirmations that fascism offers:

What fascism allows the masses to express are repressed drives, imprisoned desires...fascism teaches us that under certain circumstances, human beings imprisoned within themselves, within body armor and social constraints, would rather break out than fill their stomachs; and that their politics may consist in organizing that escape, rather than an economic order that promises future generations full stomachs for life. (p. 432)
Using his media-created position as a political outsider who will make things right, Trump, himself resentful, mirrors his supporters’ resentments in a self-reinforcing prioritizing of emotion (Kellner, 2017). Likewise, Bolsonaro embodies self-truth, where “the content of what he says doesn’t matter: what matters is the act of saying it” (Brum, 2018, para. 10).

Truth is therefore transformed into a mere personal choice, to be assigned to the person you agree with. Whatever Bolsonaro or Trump might say is determined to be honest and sincere, while their critics are dismissed as having ulterior motives. Authoritarian populists and fascists are quite comfortable with emotion over consistency and it serves as a major source of their power, especially when conveying violent messages (Connor, 2018). Followers are drawn to a demagogic figure like Trump, Putin, or Bolsonaro, “not by a belief in the efficacy of his policies but by the emotional satisfaction they experience in his presence” (para. 28). For Connor, demagogy is itself a “form of expressive politics,” and is incredibly difficult to counter because this emotional attachment to a leader can often endure their failure to follow through with promises (para. 30). Anti-revolutionary social bonds are further consolidated over collective anger, with members mirroring each other’s resentments while being contained and absorbed by the crowd (Sartre, 1976).

This is the key distinction between harnessing anger among leftist movements and right-wing ones: meaningful change is subdued by self-expression and the status quo remains (Burton, 2018a).

The third and perhaps most powerful characteristic of rationalizing violence is that authoritarian populists and fascists give permission to their followers to participate in various levels of enacting such violence, or, they are promised freedom from the responsibility of their actions (Theweleit, 2010b). Jacobs (2018) points out that a common misconception is that all authoritarians are submissive and seek approval from those they perceive to be strong or that they prioritize respecting authority. Instead, Jacobs notes that Trump supporters prefer “a belligerent, combative approach toward people they find threatening” over more conventional values such as traditional respect for authority and obedience (para. 5). In other words, “authoritarianism in the Trump era is not the wish to follow any and every authority, but, rather, the wish to support a strong and determined authority who will crush evil and take us back to our true path” (para. 15). Understanding this distinction is an essential component in fighting fascism and authoritarian populism.

This dominant totality of being (Theweleit, 2010b) requires the element of establishing superiority where the needs of others are viewed as a threat to the freedom from responsibility and the right to violence. Ethical and moral constraints are out the window, encapsulated in Trump’s comment that he could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody, and still not lose voters. Giroux (2016) concludes that “Ruthlessness, narcissism and bullying are the organizing principles of Trump’s belief that only winning matters and that everything is permitted to further his own self-interests” (para. 8). This carries over into hostility toward public
institutions that adhere to principles of diversity with a preference for a vigilante-oriented police force and self-styled militia groups (Gessen, 2017).

Ultimately, the sheer audacity of unaccountability drives violence to repeat the unthinkable and escalate the next time around. Yet, it is important to understand that freedom from responsibility never applies to everyone, just the authoritarian populist or fascist who is entitled to free reign of their emotions and desires (Sartre, 1976). The very notion of being held accountable is a major affront. What contributes to their perceived immunity is the relative lack of accountability of past perpetrators. Brum (2018) and Bevins (2018) provide the example of Bolsonaro openly celebrating past Brazilian and other South American dictators’ acts of torture and murder. He feels free to do this precisely because of the Brazilian government’s unwillingness to hold people accountable for those actions. As Theweleit (2010a) concludes:

that explains the enormous attraction of fascist celebrations and their overwhelming impact on participants: “I can’t believe my eyes…what in the world are they doing?” and then the liberating thought, “but everybody’s doing it…my God, they are actually doing it!” (in the name of the law, too). (p. 430)

Against Liberalism

Though the forms and degrees may vary, another commonality among those who hold various populist and fascist ideologies is an opposition to liberal democracy and secularism (Bello, 2018). After decades of progress-centered messaging about technology, civil rights, global connectedness, education, and science—albeit from a neoliberal framework—it seems jarring to see “a slide back into the age of authoritarianism” on a world-wide scale (Der Spiegel Staff, 2018, para. 5). The embracing of populist and fascist ideas builds on a form of cynicism that is disconnected from social action with people seeking emotional validation from violence, nostalgia, and scapegoating versus meaningful change. For Ulrich (2016), the conditions leading to Hitler’s rise reflected a similar erosion of belief in government which had been building for a long time:

Those in power appeared to have no solutions to the crisis, and the more helpless they seemed to be, the greater the demand became for a strong man, a political messiah who would lead Germany out of economic misery and point the way towards renewed national greatness. (p. 223)

Authoritarian populists and fascists channel their opposition to liberalism in the form of attempting to lay claim to and enforce a specific conceptualization of culture onto the population. Liberalism and secularism represent a degraded culture against which order must be restored. Theweleit (2010b) outlines the notion of “the mass” and the threats it represents, which have been enabled by multicultural permissiveness and/or lack of religiosity. In particular, war culture, whether
talking about the military, policing or vigilante-based enforcement, permeates the opposition to liberalism as it is considered the highest cultural form (Giroux, 2016; Theweleit, 2010b). This is encapsulated in common Internet memes which assert that the military or Second Amendment is what protects the First, or the Blue Lives Matter flag stickers meant to send a message that police violence is always justified, especially against minorities. Trump himself regularly invokes anger toward liberal institutions at his rallies, prompting his supporters and politicians to threaten civil war if Trump would ever be impeached (Coutts, 2017).

It is no coincidence that authoritarian populists and fascists are against the press, and view any sort of investigative journalism as an affront to their untouchable status. This has gone as far as calls for criminalizing acts of journalism that are viewed as hostile to authoritarian leadership, including within the US. By building a sense of distrust in the press, truth then becomes a matter of which point of view you follow, not the facts:

When citizens favor blatant propaganda as their primary source of information about the world, there is little hope that they will be able to separate themselves from reactionary, officially-endorsed fascism. The cult of Trump will provide cover for an administration that has long expressed contempt for freedom of the press, and is now indicating its support for fascist policies aimed at criminalizing journalists for reporting on classified intelligence the Trump administration would prefer be kept secret. (DiMaggio, 2017, para. 8)

Polling of Trump supporters has revealed extreme hostility toward the media (other than right-wing outlets like Fox News, of course), with close to half of Republicans endorsing the idea that the government should shut down outlets that broadcast “biased or inaccurate” information (para. 7). Nearly 66% of Republicans state they trust Trump as a source of news more than CNN, The New York Times and The Washington Post combined (para. 7).

Authoritarian populists and fascists also show their opposition to liberalism by invoking nostalgia as a way to weaponize the past, feeding into notions of what Kimmel (2017) calls aggrieved entitlement. Right-wing movements are rarely future-oriented, and when the present is discussed, it is always as a form of contrast to an idealized past, highly gendered, with the past being a time when men ran things, “the way it was supposed to be.” Liberalism is therefore associated with femininity and weakness (Davidson, 2017; Kimmel, 2017). As Davidson (2017) emphasizes, “the political goal is to always push popular attitudes and legal rights back to a time before the homogeneity of “the people” was polluted by immigration…usually at some undetermined period before WWII” (p. 61). Conservative think tanks and groups such as the Claremont Institute advocate that the principles of government have been eroded by policies that have enabled dependency on welfare and rampant political correctness (Heilbrunn, 2017). Only a return to the “rough and ready” American spirit and originalism of the Founding Fathers can stop such societal decline.
It is important to note that while both Marxists and right-wing movements utilize the past as part of their ideologies, there is a critical difference. The Marxist use of dialectical materialism involves the past being employed as a form of historical analysis and a way to confront the normalization of the status quo. With right-wing movements, nostalgia is weaponized as a way to enforce a mythical past bound up in racist and sexist discourse, all in the service of capitalism. Giroux (2016) discusses how fascism can be opposed by such use of the past in order to “protect the present and the future against the damage now forgotten” (para. 2). In contrast, the call to “make American great again” keeps Trump supporters not only locked into a past, but one that never existed (Kellner, 2016).

**Enforcement of Masculinity**

Though often not discussed in relationship to fascism and authoritarian populism, gender plays a pivotal role through an enforcement of a specific vision of white supremacist masculinity. Both share the characteristic of hyper-masculinized discourse which saturates their ideologies and reveals important contradictions:

It is through a decidedly gendered and sexualized rhetoric of masculinity that this contradiction between loving America and hating its government, loving capitalism and hating its corporate iterations, is resolved. Racism, nativism, anti-Semitism, antifeminism—these discourses provide an explanation for the feelings of entitlement thwarted, fixing the blame squarely on “others” whom the state must now serve at the expense of white men. The unifying theme is gender. (Kimmel, 2017, p. 255)

Gender essentialism, which extends to homophobia and transphobia, is a matter of absolutes and fits in nicely with right-wing movements, especially the notion of needing to get back to the correct order of things when men ruled. Popular figures like Jordan Peterson use flawed principles of evolutionary psychology and mythology to posit that if men simply took control, the West could be brought back into line in a world where “the clear borders of culture have been dissolved” (Burton, 2018a, para. 3).

Specific interpretations of mythology and mysticism (including religion) often appear within such discourse, with “the theme of intense male comradeship nourished by violence and at odds with bourgeois family life” (Lyons, 2017, para. 13). This brings to mind earlier 1980s and 1990s incarnations of the mythopoetic men’s movement where group events like primitive camping retreats were meant to promote bonding through a reconnection with a lost masculinity. Peterson relies heavily on Jung’s archetypes, asserting that order and culture are primarily male, with chaos and the unknown being female (Mishra, 2018). Any form of opposition to male dominance is portrayed as going against the natural order of things, reflected in support for figures like Putin, who “embodies the longing for an unbroken, unambiguous identity that seems to have gone missing in pluralistic, heterogenous
societies” (Der Spiegel Staff, 2018, para. 45). Wolff (2018) speculates that a figure like Steve Bannon, who also advances similar views, could once be harmlessly considered a rugged antihero with a working-class background but now is dangerous considering the political climate. We are currently in a situation, Wolff asserts, where “the American man story is a right-wing story” (p. 57).

Enforcement of masculinity within authoritarian populist and fascist ideologies involves the three components of first, misogyny; second, women and the feminine (including homophobia) being positioned as threats; and third, the contradictory persona of man as simultaneously warrior and victim. Lopez (2017) points out the important distinction between more traditional, paternalistic forms of sexism among conservative and even liberal voters and more aggressive manifestation of misogyny, the latter being closely correlated with support for Trump. This reflects a more deliberately misogynistic outlook toward women than simply wishing they would occupy more traditional roles, as is often theorized about the right wing.

In comparing the Christian right with the alt-right, Lyons (2017) finds a coming together around such rampant misogyny:

The two movements agree on several key points: that gender roles are based on innate differences between males and females and need to be aggressively enforced for the good of society as a whole; that it’s natural and right for men to hold power over women; and that women’s main functions in society are to provide men with support, care and sexual satisfaction, and to bear and raise children. (para. 7)

Common positions taken by the alt-right, especially in online forums, is that women should not be allowed to vote and should have major restrictions imposed upon them in terms of reproductive policies (Nagel, 2017). Though there may be some women who identify themselves members of the alt-right, the majority of the movement makes it pretty clear that they are hostile to women, at the very least labelling them as irrelevant to their overall aims.

Alt-right discourse is filled with misogynistic and homophobic language, with those labeled weak as “cucks” or “fags” as well as receiving graphic threats of rape (Romano, 2016; Lyons, 2017). Racism and misogyny are fused together within the alt-right, to advocate not just for white supremacy, but “more specifically white male supremacy,” the sexism of which often serves as a recruitment tool from misogynistic online groups to white supremacist ones (Lyons, 2017, para. 2). Indeed, some of the men’s rights and pickup artists blogs regularly assert that western civilization is collapsing because of women’s reproductive and economic freedom as well as immigration and interracial marriage (Nagel, 2017).

An interesting contradiction emerges within fascist discourse in particular regarding the family. In many cases, the family represented a form of order which reflected the ideal fascist state, beginning with the authoritarian father at the head of the household who expected unquestioned obedience, and the use of harsh punishment to police the ego. Fascism requires the family in order to acclimate people to its
requirements. However, the family also served as a challenge to establishing fascism in that feelings of care and self-preservation could interfere with establishing total loyalty from citizens (Theweleit, 2010b). To deal with this contradiction in Nazi Germany, families ceded control by registering their children in the Hitler Youth and Girls League, where children’s obedience shifted from the parents to Hitler. This broke the final self-preservation bond of the family as “it became an organization for the terror of formal domination” (p. 252). This was also done through rendering women invisible, as Theweleit (2010a) found in analyzing the diaries and memoirs of Friekorps members where wives were hardly mentioned:

Relationships with women are dissolved and transformed into new male attitudes, into political stances, revelations of the true path, etc. as the woman fades out of sight, the contours of the male sharpen; that is the way in which the fascist mode of writing often proceeds. It could almost be said that the raw material for the man’s “transformation” is the sexually untouched, dissolving body of the woman he is with. (p. 35)

A second manifestation of the enforcement of masculinity in authoritarian populist and fascist discourse and actions is through positioning the woman or the feminine as a threat. The most recent political examples of woman as threat includes violent reactions to Congresswomen Alexandria Ocasio Cortez and Ilhan Omar, as well as Hillary Clinton, perhaps the original ultimate figure of cosmopolitan liberalism and male displacement that has sustained conservative anger for over 30 years (Fraser, 2017). Figures such as Clinton serve as a stand-in for blame about immigration and economic loss because of her association with feminism even though she is a more centrist political figure.

Where Theweleit (2010a) found that Friekorps members were silent regarding their wives, there was no shortage of descriptions of Jewish or communist women and the depravities they represented, encapsulated in the persona of “the proletarian woman” who served as a focus of male bonding over the use of violence to rid society of her presence:

The proletarian woman is shameless…is a whore…The women are threatening, because, among other reasons, they are not virgins. The sexual experience that nationalist soldiers sense in them seems to release a particularly powerful fear. That fear is brought into association with the word “communist” (p. 68)

Theweleit posits that contributing to this personification of women were dramatic social changes brought on by the economic conditions of the post-WWI era. Women were now more visible, often the single heads of households, joining in labor actions, becoming vocal in the Communist parties, and creating disruptions around access to food and necessities—in other words, changing into an alien being from the Friekorp male point of view. Worse still was their perceived sexual freedom, which was directly connected to the leftist notion of solidarity, prioritizing connections with others over allegiance to the state. Today, both populists and fascists openly
despise the transgressive figure of the poor woman, especially if she is black or Latina. Images of out-of-control sexuality are channeled into the stereotype of the welfare queen who is always having children and regularly summoned to buttress rage and resentment.

An additional aspect of the feminine-as-threat present in both authoritarian fascism and populism is homophobia, even though authors such as Lively and Abrams (2002) continually attempt to link homosexuality with Nazism as a way to both discredit LGBTQI rights and minimize the far-right’s historical record of targeting the LGBTQI community with violence and discrimination. Theweleit (2010b) presents a complex analysis of the fascist framing of homosexuality, acknowledging that while some key Nazi party members were gay, knowledge of this fact was utilized in a strategic way by the upper echelon:

In the first instance, the fascists feared the potential of permissible homosexuality to develop into forms of sexuality they could no longer easily organize and contain. Second, the legalization of homosexuality was seen as likely to eliminate one of the key areas of transgression into which the fascist had to be initiated and accepted, were he to gain access to the secrets that were the domain of a specific power elite. In other areas of social life, the Nazis were clearly denied access both to secrets and power: thus, homosexuality became all the more indispensable. It replaced access to social decision-making power with the freedom to do what was forbidden. (p. 339)

Similar to the phenomenon of Republican politicians who sponsor anti-LGBTQI legislation later being found to be gay themselves, if gay Nazi party members refused to follow orders, they would be faced with the threat of exposure. Therefore, the permission granted to higher-ranking officers to be gay was to further entrench a dependency on the fascist movement for political (and literal) survival. This created a constant, destabilizing dichotomy which Theweleit describes as, “thou shalt love men, but thou shalt not be homosexual…thou shalt do what is forbidden, yet still be punished” (p. 339).

The third and final aspect of enforcement of masculinity is the irresolvable pairing of man as both dominating warrior who establishes authority while also being simultaneously a victim of feminism, reverse racism, liberalism, and global corporatist capitalism. The warrior/victim dichotomy begins with a construction of the dominant white masculine persona, which is constructed by patching together “a theory that explains their plight—grafting together fringe elements of evangelical Christianity, traditional anti-Semitism and racism, and general right-wing paranoia into an amalgam that is loosely held together by a nostalgic vision of hardy, independent frontier manhood” (Kimmel, 2017, p. 248). This warrior persona is then set into a portrait of extreme victimization (the undeserving taking what is his), with his primary agenda being the restoration of the correct order of things.

The utilization of the warrior/victim dichotomy is aptly represented by DeVega’s (2016) account of a professor who began to field questions from students who
were concerned about what Trump’s election would mean for them and their rights. However, the professor noticed that one white male student was happy with the election results, and would make obvious facial expressions whenever issues of race or gender were brought up in class. After the election, this same student insisted on bringing up the topic of the election, even though the class was addressing another unrelated topic. After the professor attempted to redirect the class to the topic at hand, the student

stood up, taking off his belt and then putting it on her desk. Smiling, with a mix of threat and joy, he announced that “We won!” His point was made: This is “his” country—and by extension (at least in his mind) his classroom—now and again. For this angry young white man, America’s natural order of things had been restored with the election of Donald Trump. (para. 4)

This dichotomy also allows for the insertion of shadowy figures, such as Obama, or “The Scary Jew,” which enables a rhetorical “out” in allowing the victimized warrior to still support capitalism—which he cannot ever reject—while criticizing its “Jewish” or other excessive influences. As Kimmel (2017) explains, “it’s not the capitalist corporations that have turned the government against them, but the international cartel of Jewish bankers and financiers, media moguls, and intellectuals who have already taken over the US state” (p. 262). Indeed, much of anti-Semitic propaganda promulgated today emerged during the same 19th century time-frame as most of the ideas continually recycled in authoritarian populist and fascist discourse by figures like Peterson: “responding, in the same way as Peterson, to an urgent need, springing from a traumatic experience of social and economic modernity, to believe—in whatever reassures and comforts” (Mishra, 2018, para. 9).

Rampant Corruption

The final shared characteristic between authoritarian populism and fascism is not only corruption, but corruption on a scale that far exceeds what is found in mainstream political organizations. This is highly ironic because right-wing leaders routinely run on a law-and-order platform of ending corruption, or, as Trump puts it, “draining the swamp” (Der Speigel Staff, 2018). In what Kellner (2017) calls Trumpland, corruption involves “an amalgam of private and public interests, encompassing the local, national, and global empire of a new world order” that is run on what can best be described as incompetent secrecy (p. 98). Russia’s business practices are another example of the imbedded corruption in authoritarian regimes and they are fully connected to the United States through PR firms and foreign policy (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014). Nazi Germany itself was also rife with corruption throughout all levels of government (Ulrich, 2016). As in the case of the Republican Party not only excusing but protecting Trump, conservative enabling allows corruption to flourish, creating a double standard for those in power and ordinary citizens.
CHAPTER 2

Corrupt regimes rely on lying as a strategy, which serves the function of covering the actions of authoritarian populists, but also creates a deliberately destabilizing climate where people are not sure who to believe, even if they are directly witnessing evidence in front of them (Alfonso, 2017; Gessen, 2018; Niman, 2019; Theweleit, 2010a). For Gessen (2018), totalitarianism requires the “continuous alteration of the past, and in the long run probably demands a disbelief in the very existence of objective truth” (para. 4). The past has to be reshaped on a regular basis in order to accommodate the constantly-changing present in the interests of the regime. Ultimately, it doesn’t even matter if people believe the lies, they have to simply see the lies as the only viable option (Gessen, 2018). This mirrors the authoritarian populist and fascist leaders’ own quest to challenge the concept of truth itself (Der Spiegel Staff, 2018).

Double-speak is a significant aspect of lying, where citizens are promised specific actions, but with no significant follow-through. Alfonso (2017) provides the example of Geert Wilders in the 2010 election where he promised not to raise the retirement age. Right after being elected, he said that he was open to considering raising the age. Yet this doesn’t matter as long as the leader emotionally fulfills the desires of their followers and reframes the double-speak in some acceptable way. Incoherence is another strategic aspect of corruption, because to seek power at all costs means doing whatever it takes to preserve it:

A demagogue can blow hot and cold, this way and that, adopt phrases or policies from one source one day and repudiate them the next. There may be nothing at the core except a vacuum that sucks into itself clichés, slogans, facts, factoids and fabrications, fragments of ideologies, policies developed by others, sometimes those others themselves—whoever and whatever might help him gain power at any given moment. Then, at his whim, he disgorges it all. The political vacuum at the core of demagogy, moreover, may correspond to, and perhaps derives from, a moral vacuum, the absence of concern for anything other than the self. (Connor, 2018, para. 26)

In order to pull all of this off, tribalism is required—the fascist or authoritarian populist leader relies on followers who elevate the leader to cult-like status who can do no wrong (McClaren, 2016). The growth of the Tea Party faction in the US is an example of harnessing dichotomous thinking to declare that there can be no middle ground (Jones, 2015). Even if a political party itself isn’t popular, the status of the leader can be enough to revive or sustain it, as with Trump. Ulrich (2016) provides the example of how German citizens would speak highly of Hitler, but not those around him. Therefore, “the mythology of the Fuhrer served a compensatory function; it blunted dissatisfaction over the problems and shortcomings of the Third Reich by blaming them solely on Hitler’s subordinates” (p. 520). In a similar manner, Republican politicians like Mitch McConnell consistently poll in the low 20s, yet they retain their positions because of their support of Trump, who maintains a high
approval rating among Republican voters (Beauchamp, 2016). Any dissatisfaction that Republican voters might have with the GOP are thereby channeled onto state and national representatives, leaving Trump untouched.

DIFFERENCES

Despite sharing several characteristics, it is important to acknowledge that there are key differences between authoritarian populists and fascists. In order to effectively confront the growth of the right wing, it is essential to accurately frame what is currently happening, rather than indiscriminately assigning labels. By only using the fascist label to categorize anything remotely authoritarian, the “opposition culture consistently misses the boat on the populist lure of fascism, especially in its incipient phases” (Weinberg, 2010, para. 31). In her introduction to Theweleit’s (2010a) examination of the psychology of the Frikorps, Barbara Ehrenreich notes how “fascism tends to become representational, symbolic” or that it is “really about something else” such as economic fears or repression (p. xi). The critical thing to understand is that the acts that Theweleit describes from Frikorps diaries and memoirs were things that actually happened, that their violent assaults and murders were not “mere gestures.” In other words, “the fascist is not doing ‘something else,’ but doing what he wants to do…what he wants he gets” (p. xi).

The first important difference has to do with paths to power. Depressing as it may be to face, authoritarian populists like Trump simply use the existing electoral system without having to implement any significant changes, whereas fascists, though they can gain access electorally, immediately seize control of the government, including the military and police (Browning, 2017; Renton, 2017). While those in favor of labelling Trump a fascist might point out that Hitler also won electorally, he essentially came to power through a political party that took voters away from other conservative parties, combined with street violence. Trump easily assumed leadership of a Republican Party that had been well on the way to authoritarian populism for decades. By contrast, fascist regimes have “reactionary ambitions to uproot all elements of proletarian democracy within bourgeois society...these goals combined with the organization of a mass base, and the use of mass politics” (Renton, 2019, p. 85). In one example, Hungary’s Fidesz party has assisted Orbán in reconfiguring the electorate by passing a law that granted citizenship rights to those of Hungarian ethnicity in countries such as Romania. Many of these individuals have never been to Hungary but they compose 10% of the electorate who supports Orbán’s agenda close to 95% of the time (Beauchamp, 2018a, para. 40).

One could even argue that the authoritarian populist label doesn’t even fully apply to Trump who routinely contradicts several of its assertions. Some examples include Trump’s threats of military aggression against North Korea and Syria or supporting Russian sanctions which conflicts with populist principles of not getting engaged militarily in other nations or claims of Trump being an economic populist.
while pretty much following the typical GOP playbook with tax cuts that benefit the wealthy or cutting social spending (DiMaggio, 2017). In order to fully establish, at minimum, authoritarian populism, Trump would have to overcome a capitalist class who openly depends on the global nature of trade (Sefla, 2017).

A second important difference is that fascist regimes tend to reject the free market libertarian economics of authoritarian populists in favor of creating social programs within a nationalist bent, because they know they need more than ambitious rhetoric to gain support for what they plan to carry out (Ulrich, 2016; Renton, 2019). For example, France’s National Front platform includes cutting taxes for the lowest income voters, price controls for utilities, keeping the 35-hour work week, and pension benefits (Alfonso, 2017). This is done within an ethno-nationalist framework of welfare chauvinism where such benefits are exclusively for native-born citizens, common platforms of the Alternative for Germany and Sweden Democrats in addition to France’s National Front (Resnikoff, 2017). Currently, existing US civil rights restrictions, regardless of how feeble they are, do not allow for similar discriminatory practices. Republicans in the US want to pretty much seek to cut all social programs across the board for everyone, though they have to be strategic in how they frame it.

Territorial ambitions and conquest represent a third distinction between authoritarian populists and fascists. Hitler’s goal of “acquiring living space” in order to meet the economic needs of German citizens was an integral part of Nazi policies (Ulrich, 2016, p. 204). Likewise, advocating nostalgia for dictatorship is a regular aspect of Bosonaro’s speeches, even as far back as 1999 when he declared on television: “Voting won’t change anything in this country. Nothing! Things will only change, unfortunately, after starting a civil war here, and doing the work the dictatorship didn’t do. Killing some 30,000 people...If some innocents die, that’s just fine” (Bevins, 2018, para. 10). In contrast, though white nationalists such as Richard Spencer commonly call for the creation of a white ethno-state by using the phrase “blood and soil,” when confronted by journalists as to how this would be specifically done, they readily retreat into avoiding the question of how an ethno-state be carried out without mass murder, such as claiming it could happen by “free choice” (Wise, 2016, para. 3).

A fourth distinction includes the larger ideological aims of authoritarian populism being about restoration of a lost past versus fascism’s goal of total transformation, a form of starting over:

The revolution of the right in both fascist Italy and Nazi Germany claimed to be using the state to socially engineer a new man and woman with new values. This is a project of transformation. The non-fascist far right however insists that the people are already the repositories of homogeneity and virtue…by contrast, the enemies of the people—elites and others—are neither homogeneous nor virtuous. Rather, they are accused of conspiring together against the people,
who are depicted as being under siege from above by the elites and from below by a range of dangerous others. (Davidson, 2017, p. 62)

This is reflected in the different historical conditions under which fascism arose in Germany and Trump’s authoritarian populism. In the 1920s and 30s, Germany was grappling with the economy and continuing its WWI-era fight to establish rule in Europe. By contrast, Trump’s “make America great again” policy—which came on the heels of the 2008 recession—is not so much about dominating specific nations, but about asserting imperialism through a rebirth of the US as a center of influence (Foster, 2017; Renton, 2017). Additionally, 19th century fascism faced a stronger, more militant left that it had to violently overcome through the establishment of fascist organizations. Today’s left is so immobilized that the far-right is pretty much limited to aiming their opposition against secular democracy, as conservatives have been doing since the Enlightenment (Renton, 2017).

In summary, characteristics of non-fascist, far-right administrations involve working within existing electoral systems, including political parties; rejecting the concept of a strong, centralized state regarding the economy (but more authoritarian populist regimes might consider strategically employing welfare chauvinism); and they do not challenge traditional class alignments as fascism does (Renton, 2019). As with continually denying that they are racist, the bulk of far-right political parties openly reject the notion that they are fascist nor do they identify with Hitler, Mussolini or other 20th century figures (Weinberg, 2010; Renton, 2019). Likewise, while Hungary’s Fidesz seeks to destroy democracy, the GOP in the US hasn’t yet reached that stage because the existing system is too profitable (Beauchamp, 2018a).

What we currently have is one of two major political parties that is “indifferent to the consequences of their actions” and hasn’t really been able to accomplish much legislatively (para. 110).

However, this does not mean that fully-realized fascism isn’t possible. What we are currently experiencing in the US could be an initial stage of downplaying or denying fascism, then slowly acclimating people to it. Neiwert (2017) asserts—and I concur—that Trump is a right-wing nativist populist, not a fascist. However, he regularly flirts with fascist and white supremacist ideas, at the very least promoting the notion that these ideas are “as equally bad” as leftist and social justice movements:

While it’s not inevitable that Republicans will go further in this direction, it’s easy to imagine them doing so as the American electorate becomes more diverse and more liberal: with more extreme gerrymandering, harsher voter restrictions, and more right-wing media consolidation and harassment of independent outlets. No single law or anti-immigrant speech would inaugurate a soft fascist regime. But a version of Hungary’s system could plausibly take root without many Americans realizing it. (Beauchamp, 2018a, para. 111)
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NEW FORMS

Conservatives have long relied on what Apple and Whitty (2002) characterize as a “power bloc” of different right-wing coalitions, including the religious right, neoconservatives, neoliberals, and libertarians. These groups will often unite, depending on the specific issue at hand. For example, religious fundamentalists often support neoliberalism or connect the concept of a free market to Christianity (Daher, 2017). There may be minor disagreements amongst the right, but those differences can be set aside, especially when it comes to limiting the civil liberties of women, minorities, immigrants and LGBTQ people or to cut taxes for the wealthy in order to restrict social spending.

Though these patterns of coalition-building are familiar, there are many new forms of ideological positioning and organizing happening within the right today. Browning (2018) posits that a newer form of authoritarianism, illiberal democracy, has become a significant means of consolidating power where “opposition parties can be left in existence and elections can be held in order to provide a fig leaf of democratic legitimacy, while in reality elections pose scant challenge to their power” (p. 16). As an example of this, Browning goes on to explain how the Electoral College in the US has essentially been weaponized:

The fifty senators from the twenty-five least populous states—twenty-nine of them Republicans—represent just over 16 percent of the American population, and thirty-four Republican senators represent states with a total of twenty-one percent of the American population. With gerrymandering and voter suppression enhancing even more the systemic Republican advantage, it is estimated that the Democrats will have to win by 7 to 11 points in the 2018 elections to achieve even the narrowest of majorities in the House of Representatives. (p. 16)

Adding to this, the choice now comes down between illiberal democracy (the far right) or “undemocratic liberalism,” represented with more centrist politicians; along with a fully marginalized left (Der Spiegel Staff, 2018, para. 15). This has also been referred to as “soft fascism,” where the political system doesn’t have to utilize extreme measures in order to engender compliance since the left as well as the mass media is effectively neutered (Bello, 2018; Beauchamp, 2018a).

The most pressing threat is the global scale of organizing and international cooperation on the right, especially through social media, where “far-right activists can draw on funds, infrastructure, and speakers from allied groups in other countries” (Renton, 2019, p. 79). A key example of this is the Free Tommy Robinson campaign after the alt-right celebrity pleaded guilty to contempt of court. Robinson had established strong connections with anti-Muslim groups outside of the UK, including Republican State Congressman Paul Gosar from Arizona. These alliances have been building over the past 20 years, such as Russian media actively hosting and promoting political figures associated with Brexit, anti-gay organizations such
as the World Congress for Families, assorted white supremacists, anti-Semites and others who openly support Putin (Pomerantsev & Weiss, 2014). As different groups experience PR and electoral successes, they can then point to those as recruiting tools that their movement is strong and accomplishing things that governments cannot do alone. At the same time, these groups can distribute blacklists or mobilize attacks on social media against their perceived enemies.

Closely related to this global mobilization is the removal of obstacles related to gatekeeping that once faced more extreme-right candidates or those from non-political backgrounds (Renton, 2019; Sefla, 2017). Despite being primary enablers of authoritarianism and fascism, conservatives did once enact some sort of ideological check within their parties, as they did when David Duke ran for Senate in the 1990s. This is no longer the case. The election of celebrities like Trump are made possible by him fusing a direct relationship with the media and his base, in effect bypassing GOP lawmakers who scramble to keep up (Beauchamp, 2016). Media outlets like Fox News create an airtight propaganda bubble around Trump, keeping mainstream news organizations in check by turning them into “yet another political enemy around which to mobilize grievances and resentments of his base” (Browning, 2018, p. 16).

Currently, the majority of the energy around conservative organizing is through the Third Position movement (Resnikoff, 2017) of the alt-right, “a sanitizing term applied to a collection of hate groups and their leaders” who, using anarchistic tropes, openly advocate the usual line-up of white supremacy, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, misogyny, and xenophobia (Stan, 2017, para. 2). What makes the alt-right somewhat distinct from authoritarian populists and fascists is that these ideologies are synthesized with the ironic discourse and attack-dog mannerisms of social media, which facilitates their growth and recruitment of members, as well as successful elections of candidates such as Trump (Romano, 2016; Nagel, 2017). Bevins’ (2018) conceptualization of Bolsonaro’s persona as “Operation Condor plus the Internet” is an apt description of the alt-right as a whole (para. 10).

The alt-right is also deliberately obscurantist, as with Richard Spencer claiming that “the left is right and the alt-right is the new left” (Nagel, 2017, p. 51). This is reflected in widely-shared Third Position authors like Aleksandr Dugin, who promotes the concept of a Fourth Political Theory, “a necessary collaboration between a bygone left (communists, socialists) and a bygone right (fascists)” where a rebranding effort of sorts is attempting to rise above traditional political categorizations like liberalism, socialism, or fascism (Draitser, 2017, para. 35). Alt-right figures like Steve Bannon regularly utilize the discourse of leftist critique as part of reinforcing white nationalism, such as framing the media as “corporatist” or “globalist” (Foster, 2017).

Marantz’s (2017) account of alt-right conspiracy theorist Mike Enoch’s pathway from libertarianism to white supremacy and fascism reveals how people are recruited into the movement due to the allure of the troll identity:

As a liberal, he had dealt with troubling facts—the achievement gap between black students and white students, say—by invoking the history of racial oppression,
or by explaining why the data didn’t show what they appeared to show….But all those explanations were abstract at best, muddled at worst, and they required levels of context that were impossible to convey in a Facebook post. Now he was free to revert to a far simpler explanation: maybe white people had more wealth and power because white people were superior. After arguing himself out of every previous position, he had finally found the perfect ideology for an inveterate contrarian—one that presented such a basic affront to the underlying tenets of modern democracy that he would never run out of enemies. (para. 34)

Wolff’s (2018) interview with Richard Spencer also reveals many key aspects of the alt-right, including its overall “tear it all down” ethos and prioritizing of camp and disruption (Nagel, 2017). When Wolff (2018) asked Spencer about how to place Bannon and Trump on the right-wing spectrum, Spencer asserted that neither fit the definition of alt-rightists as he saw it, but that they regularly advanced alt-right talking points along with being “open to the people who are open to these ideas” (p. 138). Commenting on Trump, Spencer didn’t hesitate to apply labels accordingly:

We are the Trump vanguard. The left will say trump is a nationalist and an implicit or quasi-racialist. Conservatives, because they are just so douche, say oh no of course not, he’s a constitutionalist, or whatever. We on the alt-right will say, He is a nationalist and he is a racialist. His movement is a white movement. Duh. (pp. 138–139)

Ultimately, Spencer, like other alt-right figures, sees Trump as a gateway to further infiltration into mainstream US politics by first harnessing anti-immigrant sentiment, then escalating to mass deportations, which will finally result in a white ethno-state (Nagel, 2017).

The growth of the alt-right has also revealed that traditional avenues of conservative messaging, like think tanks, once thought to be impenetrable, are fast becoming obsolete. This is especially the case with those who have opposed Trump and his brand of populism. Though they retain some degree of influence among GOP politicians and their agendas, think tanks like the Heritage Foundation and the American Enterprise Institute are fast losing ground compared to Fox News, Brietbart and online alt-right media (Heilbrunn, 2017). This shift away from traditional conservative media and authors is connected to larger economic changes in the wake of the 2008 recession and the discrediting of neoliberal optimism regarding free trade, pluralism, and globalization (Der Spiegel Staff, 2018). As Taibbi (2018) notes,

The Grand Old Coalition is broken. Conservative intellectuals have gone from faux-praising the ordinary Joe to arguing that too much democracy is a bad thing when dumb people are involved. And the family-values set has not only been stuck with an oversexed thrice-married pig as president, but left to watch in horror as they’ve been replaced as national moral censors by the Social Justice Warriors of the Internet. In the Harvey Weinstein era, the Christian right doesn’t even have a monopoly on bashing Hollywood mores anymore. (para. 20)
In effect, traditional conservatives have been rendered irrelevant in the wake of the alt-right and new forms of right-wing organizing. Their only choice is to follow suit and board the Trump train.

CAUTIONS

The ideological flexibility of today’s far-right combined with the reach of a for-profit social media represents one of its more pressing dangers (Resnikoff, 2017). These groups are highly adept at self-presentation. For example, the American Freedom Party, a strong supporter of Trump’s candidacy, recognized the need to tone down its white supremacist rhetoric—such as replacing the term “white nationalist” with “white advocate”—to make it “more palatable to moderate white voters” (para. 31). Likewise, anti-Muslim organizing provides a more subtle way to scapegoat an ethnic minority by claiming to be opposed to religion, not race (Sunshine, 2017). Often these groups utilize intersectional tactics, like using the support for LGBTQI rights to promote Islamophobia. Trump himself has no coherent political worldview other than strung-together talking points that are highly inconsistent, depending upon his current mood, need to protect himself, and permanent desire for attention (Browning, 2017). However, those he surrounds himself with, such as Steve Bannon and Stephen Miller, along with associated neoconservative generals, DO have specific ideological visions and see Trump’s impressionability as a net gain.

In the past, conservatives had to distance themselves from their supporters’ calls for violence. As Renton (2019) has noted, “We are living in a moment where the mainstream right wagers that by moving onto ground previously inhabited by the far right its own popularity will rise” (p. 84). Prior fears of appearing too supportive of authoritarian tendencies are eroding as conservative politicians are finding they need to join the alt-right train, or be left behind electorally (Lopez, 2017). The political calculus is clear, as DiMaggio (2017) remarks concerning Trump’s response to the aftermath of Charlottesville’s white supremacist march:

Trump knows he can’t afford to alienate racist elements on the right to get re-elected, and he doesn’t want to alienate them, since he himself is a racist and a bigot. Hence the refusal to use clear language to condemn the murders. His political reasoning here is completely transparent, as he’s spent his entire political career cultivating hate on the reactionary right. Although Trump eventually condemned the attack after receiving a large amount of negative press, his reversal is part of a broader trend Trump is known for, in which he initially signals to racists in his support base that he approves of their actions, thereby devaluing any later reversal as merely the product of political pressure, rather than principled opposition. The damage, of course, has already been done. Far-right fascists and racists know that the president supports their behavior when he goes out of his way to provide them cover. (para. 22)
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We also have to be alert to the fact that “early fascism nearly always plays to populism” with its discourse about being on the side of the forgotten or the “little guy” and through a racist and xenophobic lens (Weinberg, 2010). Despite our current conditions being different than those of 1930s Germany and that fascism has potentially taken on new forms, we should never overlook that the overall aims are the same: “openly espousing racism, nationalism, anti-environmentalism, misogyny, homophobia, police violence, and extreme militarism” (Foster, 2017, para. 21). In his sobering analysis of white supremacist Richard Spencer, Wise (2016) reminds us that the answer isn’t one of accommodating racism, but of opposing it:

His is not a movement of intellectual and moral principle. It is a movement of conquest, domination and control, which seeks power for power’s sake—an entirely fascist precept, incapable of existing side by side with any pretense to democratic norms or institutions. If we are to fight it, we must understand this. His is a movement that, unchecked, cannot lead to anything other than mass violence and the complete extirpation of those seen as standing in its way. If might makes right—and it does in the worldview of white nationalists—they cannot be expected to accept a partial victory (as they did in the past) and not see it through to the end. Their goals, however much they try and hide them, are genocidal. They must simply be stopped. (para. 20)

In this vein, traditional liberal approaches like calling for dialogue or counteracting fake news with factual information are not sufficient (Camacho, 2016). We are dealing with a right-wing that is either determined to restore nations to their former glory or to completely dismantle and replace them with a fascist governmental structure, both of which having minorities and immigrants in their sights as part of those plans. Evidence of the insufficiency of liberal-left responses includes the continuing influence of Brexit, and the global rise of right-wing nationalist and fascist parties in Europe, Eastern Europe, Australia, India, and South America, along with other regions (Resnikoff, 2017).

Renton’s (2019) advice for confronting the right is prescient. First, it is critical to acknowledge that opposition needs to be aimed at what the right wing is doing now, not so much applying the fascist label to tie it to past actions or some future dystopian predictions of what could be. Instead, successful strategies are intersectional, such as highlighting the current harms of racist and sexist policies, as well as extending the fight to Internet spaces where the right likes to establish dominance. Second, the electoral right does far more damage in the long run than the street right, yet the street right is most associated with traditional fascism in its symbolism, language, and actions. While Antifa is busy confronting right-wing speakers on college campuses, they completely overlook cuts to Medicare happening in Congress. Third, and most important, is to “cleave apart the alliance between center- and far-right” (Renton, 2019, p. 89). We have to focus our efforts on breaking apart this coalition, whether in online spaces, electorally, or through organized action.