

Two Faces of Fascism

COVID-19 New Normal and Trump Backlash Pose Grave Threats to Freedom

Bill Weinberg

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Around Lower Manhattan, storefronts have been boarded up since the looting in June. The plywood has been covered with murals and graffiti art on the theme of Black Lives Matter. Throughout June, angry protests were a daily affair, as in cities across the country.

Since the murder of George Floyd, the moment seems ripe with potential for a truly revolutionary situation. Anarchist ideas like abolishing the police are entering mainstream discourse with astonishing rapidity.

But, there is also the potential for an ultra-reactionary backlash—a descent into an updated American variant of fascism.

The threat persists of an imminent state of exception in the US, with basic rights completely abrogated—and, perhaps, the election suspended or canceled. In short, the establishment of the dictatorship that Trump has clearly sought since 2016.

And there is another, more insidious threat, brought to us by the COVID-19 pandemic. Any post-pandemic return to normality will be concomitant with the imposition of a totalizing surveillance state and unprecedentedly intimate social control. All spheres of life will be mediated through digital technology means absolute surveillance.

Resisting this dystopia is a tricky proposition because the virus actually is a threat.

Contrary to what Trump's radical-right followers believe, it is not a hoax or creation of the liberal media. And, this second dystopia could be instated under a liberal democracy—such as the U.S. under Joe Biden.

How It Could Happen Here

Two works of future fiction from the last century crystallize these twin threats with an almost preternatural clarity. One, predictive of Trump-fascism, is *It Can't Happen Here*, Sinclair Lewis's 1935 powerful novel about what the United States would look like if a Hitler or Mussolini figure came to power.

The fascist who is elected president in this grim vision is amusingly named Buzz Windrip, and the parallels to Trump are extraordinary, with some of the rhetoric matching verbatim. For instance, the appeal to the “forgotten men.”

Windrip shares Trump's amalgam of populism and racism. A part of Windrip's platform is to instate Jim Crow at the federal level, with the best jobs put aside for white men, and Blacks officially disenfranchised of the vote. Today, we have voter suppression laws and strategies. Trump, who rose to power by blaming non-whites for the decline of the white middle class, is playing to vicious racism more blatantly than ever.

Here's the part that is worrisome. Windrip's Reichstag (Hitler's excuse for assuming dictatorial powers) comes on the day of his inauguration. Blacks gather in Washington to protest, there is violence (possibly staged by provocateurs), and finally a massacre as troops fire on demonstrators. This sets the stage for Buzz to push through his legislative package establishing a dictatorship upon taking office.

There are some differences with the current situation, comfortingly. Four years into the Trump presidency, the Administration has not yet been able to find the pretext that could enable it to consolidate emergency powers. The formal rudiments of democracy are in place however precariously. This is partially due to incompetence, and partially to resistance from the “deep state”—elements of the federal bureaucracy not coopted by Trump’s fascist agenda. And, probably warnings from the military brass, motivated by fears of mutiny, that they do not have Trump’s back.

This brings us to another difference. Windrip already built his paramilitary force before being elected—akin to Hitler’s Brown Shirts or Mussolini’s Black Shirts, but patriotically named the Minute Men (another prescient touch that foresaw the militant, anti-communist organization of the 1960s with that name). Right-wing militias are coming to the fore now, and are a much more significant force than they were in 2016. They’ve been especially mobilized by white middle-class discontent with the COVID-19 lockdown measures. An armed movement is congealing now, loyal to Trump if not yet under any effective means of centralized command.

Rage Against the Machine—in 1909

But let’s turn back to that other dystopia that will still face us, even if we are lucky enough to avoid Trump fascism. Amazingly, it’s a book written way back in 1909 that predicted this second, more futuristic dystopia.

The Machine Stops by EM Forster, who most famously wrote *A Passage to India*, is exactly predictive of a cybernetic post-pandemic totalitarianism. Forster foresaw not only the Internet and subsequent eclipse of the meat world, but also social distancing and distance learning.

The novella takes place after some unnamed disaster forces the human race to live below ground in isolated cells which they rarely leave. Society is governed by the Machine—a vast network that connects the individual cells all over the world. They communicate with each other through the Machine, so they never actually see or have any physical contact with, each other. Sound familiar?

Predicting today’s ubiquitous video-telephony, Forster writes: “It only gave a general idea of people—an idea that was good enough for all practical purposes...Something ‘good enough’ had long since been accepted by our race.”

This is the approaching reality. Students will never sit in classrooms again. Political meetings, lectures, cultural events, musical performances—all will be done remotely. That’s going to be “good enough,” and people will forget in another generation what the real world was actually like.

This is, to stretch the definition, another face of fascism or, at least, of totalitarian social control. It is not fascism on the classical model of Hitler and Mussolini, that Trump is now approaching. It is what has been called “friendly fascism,” consistent (at least initially) with liberal democracy. But the mechanisms of control under this model, while less brutal, could be more complete.

Moreover, these models are not mutually exclusive. Trump has thus far been playing to the backlash against social isolation. That could change in a minute. If his attempts to foment a national crisis fail, he could exploit the virus as the crisis, and use the pandemic as a pretext for imposing his more classical fascist order.

Whether we manage to avoid Trump-fascism or not, we’re still going to face the challenge of keeping alive some kind of human future in the high-tech post-pandemic dystopia.

Bill Weinberg blogs at **CounterVortex.org**.

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