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And Why They're Becoming So Dangerous

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On April 15, “alt-right” supporters of Donald Trump invaded Berkeley, physically attacking people in the name of white supremacy, anti-Semitism, and nationalism while the police looked on. A large number of them were outright fascists who had converged from around the United States in hopes of creating an advertisement for right-wing violence. Finally, the Trump regime is getting the street cadre it needs to graduate to the next stage of fascism. Setting aside disingenuous arguments that the best way to support free speech is to promote totalitarian ideas, we have to ask ourselves—who are these people? Why are they attracted to fascism? And how do we stop this phenomenon from spreading?

When you find yourself on the receiving end of oppression, there are three ways you can respond. The first is to make common cause with others who are also experiencing oppression in order to defend and expand spaces of freedom and autonomy. This probably means working with people who are worse off than you, as they are more likely to revolt than those whose lives are more comfortable. Choosing this approach requires courage, humility, and a certain amount of risk tolerance.

The second option is to knuckle under and accept your lot. This is what most people do in the US: they slog through their routines under the watchful eyes of bosses, police patrols, surveillance cameras, NSA employees, and Facebook networks in a world that accords them less and less freedom. However, this strategy is becoming increasingly untenable as the various crises of our time intensify.

The third and final option is to identify with your oppressors, embracing their agenda and projecting your agency onto them.

This is not a battle we can afford to stand aside from. If we do not prioritize this now, we will pay a grievous price later.

More importantly, however, we have to solve the problems that produce the fascist mentality in the first place. In response to widespread poverty, powerlessness, and isolation, we have to show that it is possible to work together across different lines of identity, we have to propose collective solutions to the problems of our time and pose effective resistance to those who would take away our freedom. Otherwise, without any viable alternatives, people will continue to gravitate to fascism.

Finally, above all, we have to spread another set of values, another set of desires. To oppose fascism, we must resist the temptation to respond reactively to others’ violence, to militarize ourselves, to build symmetrical machines of war. When we resist, we should do so in ways that undermine the very foundations on which fascist narratives are constructed. We should become more compassionate, more creative, more unique and romantic and outrageous. In place of essentialist ways of conceiving selfhood, we have to celebrate difference and change within and between us; in place of authoritarian notions about government, we have to cultivate a profound collective hunger for freedom.

If we can do these things, neither fascist street violence nor state oppression will be able to stem the tide of change. Good luck, dear friends.

ers of the peace. Yet in clashes between fascists and those who oppose them, the police are anything but neutral. This explains why we saw a large number of unmasked fascists attacking masked demonstrators in Berkeley: those who defend themselves against rising fascism must conceal their identities so the police do not charge them with criminal activity, while unmasked fascists are free to assault people with knives and guns without fear of police intervention.

At a time when so many people feel powerless—both because the unfair advantages they used to have are eroding and because life is becoming more difficult for all but a few wealthy people—to be given a free hand to take out their frustration on those weaker than themselves is seductive indeed. This is what Trump, Putin, le Pen, Erdogan, and other aspiring despots are hoping poor people will do with their resentment. If they can create a feedback loop in which the more oppression is inflicted on people, the more people identify with them, their power will be secure forever.

So what do we do? How do we fight against the spread of fascism?

First, we have to make sure that it is impossible for fascists to experience the thrill of wielding power over others. To promote fascism to the poor and angry, fascists have to be able to demonstrate that they can offer the cheap pleasure of bullying people. If they are able to create advertisements for oppressive violence, they stand to gain tremendous numbers. This is why it is of paramount importance that we confront and defeat fascists whenever they try to take the streets, and that we do so by any means necessary.

The more powerful they become, the more powerful you feel. As a strategy to improve your life, this has nothing to recommend it: associating your interests with those who hold power over you can only worsen your situation. But for those who lack strength of character, who are so desperate for a respite from their feelings of powerlessness that they are willing to go on giving up power in return for it, this option can be seductive.

This explains how millions of poor people could rally behind a billionaire. Having given up on gaining any real power in their own lives, all that remains to them is to participate willingly in their own oppression—and to assist their oppressors in wielding power over others.

They are the fan-boys of tyranny. In return for serving as lackeys and bootlickers, they hope to bully others in the way that they themselves are bullied. They do this free of charge—they don't even warrant a paid position at the bottom of the official hierarchy. They are the ideal underlings: craven and submissive towards those in authority, cruel and abusive towards themselves and others.

Their identification with those in power is always a kind of cosplay: they can only be a pathetic imitation of the tyrants they look up to. They ape the Spartans, the Romans, the Nazis, who themselves were pathetic imitations of an idealized image of manhood, mere cogs in a military machine. All who prostrate themselves before abstract ideals rather than valuing real existing humanity in all its diversity are condemned to despise themselves.

Although bullies can appear to be powerful, everything they do to wield power only disempowers them. To have real power,

you have to be based in a community that supports you in freely disposing of your potential as you see fit, which requires building meaningful ties with those who are different from you. Bullies give up on this, relying on force in their relations with others rather than interchanging care. Lacking any sense of self-worth, having given up on accomplishing anything meaningful to enrich others' lives or their own, the only form of pride that remains to fascists is membership in an abstract category. They do not consider themselves valuable as individuals, but only as citizens, white people, "Western chauvinists," members of a gang. This is the consolation prize of identity, reserved for weak individuals who feel that they have no value on their own merits.

This consolation prize does not come cheaply. To obtain it, they have to crush everything beautiful in themselves, everything that renders them capable of empathy or creativity. They must contort their sexuality. They have to memorize mantras of entitlement—for those who benefit from unfair advantages, however slightly, are always nagged by the sneaking suspicion that they do not deserve what they have. They have to work hard not to identify with others, not to recognize themselves in those who are different from them, not to stand out as unique.

This sort of self-policing is a full-time job. Rendering themselves helpless and weak before their overlords, they imagine they are rooting out weakness. Destroying everything in themselves that could render them capable of freedom, they imagine they are defending their freedom. Rendering relations of mutual trust impossible, they tell themselves they are protecting their communities.

At the bottom of all their sadism, we find a fundamental masochism. To justify their behavior, they need to be on the receiving end of violence. They must be at once master race and underdog, torturer and victim. Carrying out genocides, they protest that they are the ones targeted for genocide. Wracked with self-loathing, on some level they must genuinely desire to be exterminated for the exterminations they hope to carry out.

In fact, it is their own leaders who are victimizing them—think of all the Nazis who died carrying out orders for Adolf Hitler, and all the money pouring into the pockets of savvy businessmen like Donald Trump at the expense of the suckers who support them. Above all, they are victimizing themselves, giving up their agency in return for the addictive experience of being a cog in the machinery of violence.

To protect themselves from recognizing this, they require external threats. Where such threats do not exist, they must be created. This is the meaning of the Muslim Ban, for example: it is intended to create outsiders, to provoke them into reciprocal violence. Bullies who offer nothing of value to humanity can only hope that some symmetrical threat can make them look good by comparison. If ISIS did not exist, it would be necessary to invent it; Islamophobic violence is intended to accomplish precisely this.

These goons are of great use to the authorities. They can carry out attacks that the state is not yet able to, intimidating those who might otherwise rebel. They distract from the institutionalized violence of the state, which is still the cause of most of the oppression that takes place in our society. Above all, they enable the authorities to portray themselves as neutral keep-