



## Trump: Fascist or demagogue?

By Thomas Kühne and Mary Jane Rein

'Fascism is capitalism plus murder,' Upton Sinclair declared in 1934 during his unsuccessful bid to become governor of California. More than eight decades later, the media have been aflame with discussions about fascism as it relates to the candidacy of Donald J. Trump. These are legitimate claims that deserve ample consideration. Simplistic formulas like Sinclair's did not help Democrats prevent the rise of fascism in interwar Europe and simplistic historical analogies won't help fend off Trump today.

Renowned for his capitalist excesses, Trump doesn't eschew violence as his campaign rallies have shown. But is he a fascist?

He certainly draws upon fascist themes, but those ideologies glorify violence as a tool to upend the political order. Despite hinting at expanded presidential powers, Trump is unlikely to overthrow the Constitution. And while certainly a racist and a demagogue who favors elements of fascist rhetoric, Trump is also a classic American individualist.

In his case, the "I" comes well before the "we." Such robust individuality is directly contrary to fascism, which invests power in the national collective.

Thus, Trump fails the fascist test on several counts, yet the analogy remains powerful and seductive. What can such historical equations teach us? Do they serve as anything more than propaganda designed to demonize the candidate and generate publicity?

Journalists favor simple truths, but from the historian's perspective, Trump is no Hitler. And inflammatory language equating them obfuscates the underlying reasons behind Trump's popularity.

The problem is not so much Trump himself but his unexpected success with voters. After all, Hitler himself was not such a remarkable person. Rather, people's willingness to believe in him was the cause for his rise. Like Hitler, Trump connects with struggling Americans who believe that they can't get ahead despite hard work. Many are disillusioned because they have been denied the prosperity they believe they deserve. And they resent their more educated peers who are thriving in ever greater numbers.

The rise of the Nazi party in the Germany of the 1930s opens some insight into the present election. Trump echoes Hitler in his appeal to nativist sentiments that view average citizens as robbed of their jobs and prosperity by undeserving outsiders. But Hitler was not elected by the unemployed, as many mistakenly believe. The truly dispossessed voted for the Communist Party, which was better attuned to their interests. Rather, the lower middle class, the working poor who were afraid of losing their jobs, voted the Nazis into power.

They were eager to prevent further declines in their economic status and were susceptible to the racist rhetoric that Hitler used to whip up their frustrations.

Over the past few decades, a massive demographic shift has occurred across western industrialized societies. Fifty years ago, the majority of people managed to pay for basic expenses like rent and food although they struggled to accumulate wealth. Today, the majority of Americans earn decent wages.

They live relatively well and are able to afford consumer goods after paying for their basic necessities. Those left behind feel their influence shrinking and are susceptible to

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the charisma and rank nationalism of Trump.

This phenomenon is hardly limited to the US election. Trump enthusiasts have their counterparts in Austria, France, Germany and other western industrialized societies. In Europe, too, many lower-class citizens espouse patriotism and are fiercely anti-immigrant.

They embrace the right-wing populist agendas of political parties like Marie Le Pen's National Front in France. Only recently, the extremist Freedom Party Candidate lost the Austrian presidency by a narrow margin, despite the widespread support of Austrians. Calling these politicians "fascists" grabs headlines but distracts from the core problem, which is both economic and cultural.

The dramatic shift over the last 30 years — the rise of a globalized and increasingly diverse postmodernity — seems to benefit only those who are well settled and hew to the political left, the liberals and the Democrats.

As long as Trump's supporters feel that they are being denied economic prosperity and symbolic recognition, they will fail to appreciate the repugnance of a political order based on hate and blame. But polemical parallels that view Trump as fascist or a Hitler figure miss the point.

Facile analogies aside, should Trump be elected President, don't count on him to disrupt the democratic order. His desire to be popular will ultimately prevent him from doing anything so radical. And unlike European countries in the 1920s and 1930s, the United States can rely on almost two and a half centuries of uninterrupted democratic traditions.

But we ignore Trumpian discourse at our peril. It is high time for our mainstream political parties to take seriously those Americans dispossessed and sidelined by the postmodern globalized economy.— *Mary Jane Rein, Ph.D., of Worcester, is executive director of the Strassler Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies at Clark University. Thomas Kühne, Ph.D., of Worcester, is Strassler Professor of Holocaust History and the director of the Strassler Center. He is the author of "Belonging and Genocide. Hitler's Community, 1918-1945" (Yale University Press, 2013).*

