

The Alt-Right Movement and America's "Weimar Moment"

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This month commemorates seventy-five years since the attack on Pearl Harbor by the forces of Imperial Japan – an attack in which 2,403 Americans were killed and directly led to the United States' entry into World War II. By December 11th, the United States was officially at war with Japan, as well as Germany and Italy. The war lasted four years, and by the end over four hundred thousand Americans were killed – approximately sixty million people worldwide.

It is perhaps not an exaggeration at all to say that we are perceptibly succumbing – in word if not in deed – to the same ugly reactionary forces that brought on that war: fascism, the politics of racial superiority, anti-Semitism, and militarism. The so-called alt-right, a still relatively small but growing white nationalist movement, is slowly creeping into the mainstream of American politics. In fact, given that it has a line to the White House (through the president-elect's appointment of Steve Bannon as Chief Strategist) we can expect that it will continue to gain followers in this country.

The alt-right movement is precisely a betrayal of everything Americans fought and died for in World War II. When their spokesmen quote Nazi propaganda with approval — when they shout 'hail victory' (the English translation of Sieg Heil) — US citizens disgrace America; they disgrace our national history and the blood we spilled fighting and defeating fascism.

The worst mistake we can make is to treat the alt-right as a movement embodying opinions: already, we have begun to see a decided shift towards the acceptance of white nationalist and separatist ideology as simply one more position alongside others on the political spectrum. But the alt-right is not just one more point of view: we cannot afford to dignify it by merely agreeing to disagree. While it would like to be regarded as a movement of ideas, its momentum is emerging not from opinions or ideas at all, but insecurity and resentment.

The alt-right has given new vitality to white supremacism, which is not an idea but a racist ideology, and thus cannot simply be treated with counter-arguments. Once it is regarded as a political position — to be countered with rational argument — it has already implicitly been accorded a rational status. The white supremacist does not simply have an incorrect, distorted view of reality – he has a distorted view of himself. He has not fallen prey to bad science; he has not simply embraced positions that happen to be wrong, because what he defines as a position is a façade — a front, not only to the public, but even more so, to himself. The white supremacist is not in the grip of merely false beliefs, but illusions – beliefs that are allowed to operate because they are self-gratifying. Sometimes illusions may be harmless. Illusions about race are not – they are inherently violent: that the white race is the source of all creative value in the world, at once satisfies a deep-seated wish for racial superiority, and provides the justification for the exclusion and outright discrimination

against non-whites and minorities.

If racially motivated extremists have not received explicit or direct support from Trump himself, they have undoubtedly benefited from the widening spread of Trumpism, which continues to embolden their movement. Trumpism — we might say — is the victory of a certain epistemology; it is the view that knowledge is reducible to perception. It has no use for anything like the disinterested pursuit of truth — which has become no more than whatever belief happens to be expedient and best serve one's self-interest.

In its contempt for things like evidence, justification and warrant, Trumpism has created a social condition in which virtually all the normal constraints on public speech and discourse no longer apply. The problem is that when anything can be said, we must invariably find ourselves in the predicament that nothing can be said; because if we do not recognize any non-formal unwritten rules about what can be said, we lose the background assumptions without which public discourse ceases to have any meaning at all.

It is perhaps sad to say, but nonetheless true, that liberals helped to create the conditions in which Trumpism could flourish. As the French philosopher Alain Badiou put it, the truth is “indifferent to difference” and in its essence universal in nature — it is not impressed by ethnicity, nationality, or race: truth is “the same for all.” This basic principal is what many liberals and multiculturalists ultimately refused to acknowledge; and it is coming back to haunt them. Over the past two decades, much of the political sphere has been reduced to respecting personal identity — and, consequently, identity politics has been co-opted by white nationalists, as was inevitable. Now, political correctness is dead in the water: its phoniness and patronizing racist underpinnings, as well as its artificially imposed rules, did little to address the causes of racism; but may have actually undermined genuine social solidarity.

Of course, we cannot entirely blame multiculturalism and liberal relativism for the emergence of white identity politics. America is experiencing something like a Weimar-moment, the liberal-democratic Germany that governed during the inter-war years, and was ultimately overcome and destroyed by the forces of fascism which germinated and was allowed to grow to infect the civil and political society within its borders. Unlike the United States perhaps, the Weimar Republic was weak: every political party — no matter how anti-republican — was allowed to compete for governmental power. Weimar was unable to clearly distinguish friend from enemy.

Today, as the race-fueled, far-right wing continues to usurp ever more political space, we are facing a very real, and very similar danger: that the extreme right will gradually infect and erode the body politic. We cannot avoid this if we allow the alt-right and its, albeit, ill-defined program to become “respectable”. With the permissibility and increasing prevalence of proto-fascist rhetoric, the extreme right is undergoing a public relations makeover; their leaders are making an effort to don a “human” face, appearing to normalize their agenda and broaden their growing appeal. At this moment in time, we must remain extremely vigilant: while our democratic institutions are not in immanent danger, the mixture of racial politics and the president-elect's right-wing authoritarianism is potentially disastrous. If a geo-political or economic crisis should occur will we meet it with our moral awareness intact, our sense of justice, and committed to fundamental democratic principles? Ultimately, this will depend on recognizing that the political problem of today is increasingly the problem of ‘love thy neighbor.’

The white-nationalists want us to believe that Muslims, Mexicans, and immigrants are not our neighbors: that Jews are not our neighbors – anyone not like them is not our neighbor. Unremittingly, however, what they have forgotten is that the neighbor does not necessarily accommodate our a priori assumptions about what they should look like, or wear, or what language they speak. As the great German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who in 1945 was hanged by the Gestapo, once wrote: “Neighborliness is not a quality in other people, it is simply their claim on our selves...We have literally no time to sit down and ask ourselves whether so-and-so is our neighbor or not.”

When we see the rise of nationalism in the United States and Europe, Russia and East Asia, and we are witness to the refugee crisis sweeping across the Middle East, Bonhoeffer’s observation that we have not the luxury of time could not be timelier.

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