

The Psychology of Fascism

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Theme: [History](#)

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The continuing rise of fascism around the world is drawing increasing attention particularly as it takes firmer grip within national societies long seen to have rejected it.

Some recent studies have reminded us of the characteristics of fascist movements and individuals, particularly as they manifest among politically active fascists. For example, in his recent book [How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us And Them](#) Professor Jason Stanley has identified ten characteristics shared by fascists which have been simply presented in the article [‘Prof Sees Fascism Creeping In U.S.’](#)

These characteristics, readily evident in the USA, Europe, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Myanmar and elsewhere today, include belief in a mythic (false) past, propaganda to divert attention and blame from the true source of corruption, anti-intellectualism and a belief in the ‘common man’ while deriding ‘women and racial and sexual minorities who seek basic equality as in fact seeking political and cultural domination’, promotion of elite dogma at the expense of any competing ideas (such as those in relation to freedom and equality), portrayal of the elite and its agents as victims, reliance on delusion rather than fact to justify their pursuit of power, the use of law and order ‘not to punish actual criminals, but to criminalize “out groups” like racial, ethnic, religious and sexual minorities’ which is why we are now ‘seeing criminality being written into immigration status’, and identification of “out groups” as lazy while attacking welfare systems and labor organizers, and promoting the idea that elites and their agents are hard working while exploited groups are lazy and a drain on the state.

In an earlier article ‘Fascism Anyone?’, published in the Spring 2003 issue of *Free Inquiry Magazine*, Professor Laurence W. Britt identified fourteen shared threads that link fascists. These include powerful and continuing expressions of nationalism, disdain for the importance of human rights, identification of enemies/scapegoats (such as communists, socialists, liberals, ethnic and racial minorities, traditional national enemies, members of other religions, secularists, homosexuals and ‘terrorists’) as a unifying cause, obsession with national security and avid identification with the military, sexism, a controlled/compliant mass media that promotes the elite agenda, a manufactured perception that opposing the power elite is tantamount to an attack on religion, corporate power protected by the political elite while the power of labor is suppressed or eliminated, disdain for intellectuals and the arts, expanded police power and prison populations in response to an obsession with the crime and punishment of ordinary citizens (while elite crimes are protected by a compliant judiciary), rampant cronyism and corruption, and fraudulent elections defended by a judiciary beholden to the power elite.

Offering a more straightforward characterization of fascism in the US context, which also highlights its violence more explicitly than the characterizations above, the eminent Norwegian peace research scholar Professor Johan Galtung explains it thus: ‘*US Fascism? Yes, indeed; if by fascism we mean use of massive violence for political goals. US fascism*

takes three forms: global with bombing, droning and sniping all over; domestic with military weapons used across race and class faultlines; and then NSA-National Security Agency spying on everybody.' See [‘The Fall of the US Empire – And Then What?’](#)

Among other recent commentaries, one draws attention to a recent fascist gathering in the USA – see [‘Davos For Fascists’](#) – another to the ways in which fascism, under various names, is being effectively spread – see [‘How the new wave of far-right populists are using football to further their power’](#) – and another warns of focusing too narrowly on one issue and missing the wider threat that fascism poses. See [‘Fascism IS Here in USA’](#).

In any case, for those paying attention to what is happening in places like the United States, Europe, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Myanmar and elsewhere, it is easy to see that the rush to embrace fascism is accelerating.

But why? Surely, in this ‘enlightened’ age, notions such as freedom, democracy, human rights and equality are deeply embedded in our collective psyche, particularly in the West. We believe that elections should be, and are, ‘free and fair’ and not determined by corporate donations; we believe that the judiciary is independent of political and corporate influence. But are they?

Well, in fact, the evidence offered by the casual observation of events in the places mentioned above, as well as elsewhere around the world, tells us that none of this is any longer, if it ever was, the case. Let me explain why.

Fascism is a political label but, like any such label, it has a psychological foundation. That is, the political behavior of those who are fascists can be explained by understanding their psychology. Of course, all behavior can be explained by psychology but I will focus on the psychology of fascist behavior here.

There have been attempts to understand and explain the psychology of fascism, starting with the early work of Wilhelm Reich in [The Mass Psychology of Fascism](#). So what is the psychology of individuals who are fascists?

You might not be surprised to read that the psychology of fascists is complex and is a direct outcome of the nature of the extraordinary violence to which they were subjected as children.

The Psychology of Fascists

Let me briefly identify the psychological profile of fascists and the specific violence (‘visible’, ‘invisible’ and ‘utterly invisible’) that generates a person with this psychology. For a thorough explanation and elaboration of this profile, and explanations of the terms ‘visible’, ‘invisible’ and ‘utterly invisible’ violence, see [‘Why Violence?’](#) and [‘Fearless Psychology and Fearful Psychology: Principles and Practice’](#).

First, *fascists are terrified* and they are particularly terrified of those individuals who perpetrated violence against them when they were a child although this terror remains unconscious to them. Second, this terror is so extreme that *fascists are too terrified to consciously identify to themselves their own perpetrator* (one or both parents and/or other significant adults *who were supposed to love them*) and to say that it is this individual or individuals who are violent and wrong.

Third, because they are terrified, they are *unable to defend themselves* against the original perpetrator(s) but also, as a result, they are unable to defend themselves against other perpetrators who attack them later in life. This lack of capacity to defend themselves leads to the fourth and fifth attributes – *a deep sense of powerlessness* and *a deep sense of self-hatred*. However, it is too terrifying and painful for the individual to be consciously aware of any of these feelings/attributes.

Sixth, because they are terrified of identifying that they are the victim of the violence of their own parents (and/or other significant adults from their childhood) and that this violence terrified them, *fascists unconsciously delude themselves about the identity of their own perpetrator*. They will unconsciously identify their ‘perpetrator’ as one or more individuals *of whom they are not actually afraid* from an existing ‘legitimized victim’ group such as children or people from a different gender, race, religion or class. This is also because *their unconscious terror and self-hatred compels them to project onto people who are ‘controllable’* (because their original perpetrators never were). For this reason, their victims are (unconsciously) carefully chosen and are always relatively powerless by comparison.

This is easy to do because, seventh, *children who become fascists have been terrorized into accepting a very narrow-minded and dogmatic belief set that excludes consideration of those in other social (including gender, racial, religious or class) groups*. The idea that they might open-mindedly consider other beliefs, or the rights of those not in the ‘in-group’, is (unconsciously) terrifying to them. Moreover, because they have been terrorized into adopting their rigid belief set, fascists develop an intense fear of the truth; hence, *fascists are both bigoted and self-righteous*. In addition, the belief set of fascists includes a powerful and violently reinforced ‘lesson’: *‘good’ means obedient*; it does not mean intrinsically good, loving and caring.

Eighth, and as a result of all of the above, *fascists learn to unconsciously project their self-hatred, one outcome of their own victimhood, as hatred for those in the ‘out-groups’*. This ‘justifies’ their (violent) behavior and obscures their unconscious motivation: to remain unaware of their own suppressed terror and self-hatred.

Ninth, *fascists have a compulsion to be violent*; that is, they are addicted to it. Why? Because the act of violence allows them to explosively release the suppressed feelings (usually some combination of fear, terror, pain, anger and powerlessness) so that they experience a brief sensation of delusional ‘relief’. Because the ‘relief’ is both brief and delusional, they are condemned to repeat their violence endlessly.

But the compulsion to be violent is reinforced by another element in their belief set, the tenth characteristic: *fascists have a delusional belief in the effectiveness and morality of violence*; they have no capacity to perceive its dysfunctionality and immorality.

And eleventh, the extreme social terrorization experience to which fascists have been subjected means that *the feelings of love, compassion, empathy and sympathy, as well as the mental function of conscience, are prevented from developing*. Devoid of conscience and these feelings, fascists can inflict violence on others, including their own children, without experiencing the feedback that conscience and these feelings would provide.

What Can We Do?

There is no simple formula for healing the badly damaged psychology of a fascist (or those who occupy a proximate 'political space' such as conservatives who advocate violence): it takes years of violent parental and adult treatment to create a fascist and so the path to heal one is long and painful, assuming the support for the individual to do so is available. Nevertheless, fascists *can heal* from the terror and self-hatred that underpin their psychology. See ['Putting Feelings First'](#). And they can be assisted to heal by someone who is skilled in the art of deep listening. See ['Nisteling: The Art of Deep Listening'](#).

Unfortunately, given their cowardice, fascists are unlikely to have the courage to seek the appropriate emotional support to heal. In the meantime, those of us so inclined must resist their violence and, ideally, this should be done strategically, particularly if we want impact against fascist national leaders. See [Nonviolent Campaign Strategy](#) or [Nonviolent Defense/Liberation Strategy](#).

The good news is that we can avoid creating fascists. If you want to nurture a child so that they become compassionate and caring, live by their conscience and act with morality and courage in all circumstances, including when resisting fascists, then consider making ['My Promise to Children'](#).

You might also consider joining the worldwide movement to end all violence, fascist or otherwise, by signing the online pledge of ['The People's Charter to Create a Nonviolent World'](#).

In essence: Fascists are terrified, full of self-hatred and powerless. But, too scared to feel their own terror, self-hatred and powerlessness, they unconsciously project this as fear of, and hatred for, the people in one or more 'legitimized victim' groups, including their own children (thus creating the next generation of fascists). They then try to 'feel powerful' by seeking violent control over these people themselves or by seeking to have violent control exercised over these people by various 'authorities', ranging from school teachers and religious figures to the police, military and various corporate and government agencies.

No matter how much control they have over others, however, it is impossible to control their own terror, self-hatred and powerlessness. So they are unconsciously and endlessly driven to seek (delusional) 'relief' by violently controlling those in legitimized victim groups. It is because their own children are the most immediately available 'uncontrollable' target that fascism is readily perpetuated.

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