

The joys of fascism: Part two

By Bill Kilpatrick

There is a quote circulating around Facebook by the eminent philosopher Bertrand Russell regarding fascism and it goes like this, "The first step in a fascist movement is the combination under an energetic leader of a number of men who possess more than the average share of leisure, brutality, and stupidity. The next step is to fascinate fools and muzzle the intelligent, by emotional excitement on the one hand and terrorism on the other." But what if this assessment is wrong? It tends to hinge on the notion that only stupid or foolish people fall for fascism, while the intelligent people are its victims, but a close look at fascist movements shows that highly intelligent, educated, and smart people are just as susceptible to fascism as everyone else, and many who resisted were not highly educated at all. This seems to mean that fascism has a pull that goes beyond education, logic and reason and speaks more to base instincts like loyalty and emotion. For example, of the 22 members of the Nazi Einsatzgruppen, or killing squads, that were tried at Nuremberg after the war, the vast majority of them would not have been considered fools as Henry A. Lea pointed out in his lecture entitled *Criminals With Doctorates*, "Most of the defendants were well educated; among them were many lawyers, a political scientist, a lapsed Protestant minister and even an opera singer. Ten of the twenty-two defendants had studied law. They were not thugs or maniacs or common criminals." One of the leaders of Einsatzgruppen C, Otto Rasch, was apparently called Dr. Dr. Rasch because he held two doctorates. But it is not who these men were that reveals their motivation, but what they did. Their killing squads followed behind the German army and their task was to murder people the regime decided were unworthy of life: Gypsies, Jews, homosexuals, Russians, Poles, and anyone deemed an "enemy" by the regime. They killed them because they viewed them not as fellow humans, but as less than human. Those who did the killing were told that because they were German they were the master race, which tapped into their tribal instinct, an instinct that was masterfully exploited by the Nazis. I quoted Robert Greene last week, but his quote deserves to be said again in this context, as he pointed out that the lower or emotional side of our nature, "tends to be stronger and its impulses pull us down into emotional reactions and defensive postures making us feel self righteous and superior to others." Sadly, education is no vaccination against our lower nature and appears to have the ability to exacerbate it, as opposed to taming it, as educated people are often better at rationalizing their emotional beliefs. These men all shared one emotional quality in common however, an undying loyalty to Adolf Hitler. Fascism is of particular danger because it gives the illusion of being rational, but it is a rationality based not on empathy and sound judgement but on emotional reasoning that, while reassuring to our egos, feeds on our individual desires to feel special, along with our desire for homogeneity, routine, familiarity, and security. These powerful emotions stem from our basic tribal instincts and a desire to belong and have a secure identity. In a multicultural world where these needs appear to be threatened, we often regress to what feels good and rationalize it as correct, over what is logically and morally right. At fascism's core lies nationalism, the most illogical and emotionally reasoned idea that has ever been concocted, and when you think about it, really think about it, it is nonsensical. Albert Einstein said, "Nationalism is an infantile disease. It is the measles of mankind," and when we look at how it truly divides us from each other, one sees a lot of truth in Einstein's observation. For example, If we look at humanity from a biological level, we are all almost identical as Wade Davis has observed stating, "Almost all DNA, 99.9 per cent of the three billion nucleotides does not vary from person to person." However, our eyes and ears all too often deceive us into believing otherwise, thus fooling ourselves out of what is true, and resulting in xenophobic "national" policies meant to benefit "us" over "them." The COVID-19 pandemic was a wake-up call in more ways than we know. It provided a break in our usual routine and our daily lives and for some this was welcomed, but for others they were confronted with themselves as they could no longer hide their problems through work, school, going to the bar, traveling, and many of the other myriad of ways we as humans avoid our problems. The LCBO's profits went up around \$100 million each year of the pandemic as people tried to cope with isolation not only from others, but from themselves. People wanted a return to "normalcy," but when it came it no longer was "normal" because the break revealed something to them that they had always suspected, but now could no longer deny, and that, as Dr. Gabor Mate observed prior to the pandemic, is the uncomfortable fact that "A sense of deficient emptiness pervades our entire culture." Our consumer culture and the desire to accumulate things satisfies a small portion of human needs and wants and despite providing us with lots of creature comforts, is hollow and exploitative and results in little deep personal satisfaction as human beings. This is the void that demagogues claim that they can fill. They claim to be offering us purpose and meaning, something that all of us deeply desire along with a sense of belonging. And make no mistake, we must have connections because we are social beings, but the extreme nationalism that demagogues offer, like the fictional connection that comes with technology, is nothing but an illusion. Demagogues offer power, both personal and otherwise, and a sense of belonging, and all they ask in return is your blind

loyalty, but as Donald Trump has shown, his loyalty, like all dictators and demagogues, comes at the expense of truth, not in the pursuit of it. We live in uncertain times, but when we look back, all times have been uncertain to some extent, and while we can do little about many issues in the world, we still retain the choice of how we respond to those issues. While Greene points out that our hard wiring often results in impulsive emotional responses to things that impact us, this can be overcome with self-awareness and critical self-reflection. However, this is something that the new reality of cyber space does not encourage, so I will leave you with these two thoughts. The military historian Basil Liddell Hart argued that "loyalty is a noble quality, so long as it is not blind and does not exclude the higher loyalty to truth and decency." Thus, the rise of fascism seems to hinge on one question that Barbara Tuchman so eloquently stated in her book *The March of Folly*, "The question remains where does duty lie: to loyalty or truth?"