

Is this fascism? No. Could it become fascism? Yes

Andrew Gawthorpe

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Trump's persistent hold on his base shows the power to be had in reinventing anti-American values as patriotic

Amid the global rise of rightwing populism, “fascist” has become a common – indeed over-used – epithet. The F-word is convenient for critics of the new wave of populism, seeking as it does to tie their opponents to historical movements which nearly all of mainstream society regards as deplorable. But the word is convenient for the right too, allowing them to wave away their critics as overwrought and deranged while avoiding serious discussion of the substance of their policies and rhetoric.

Even the Trumpified Republican party is not a fascist movement and Trump is certainly no Hitler. Full-blown fascism usually emerges under the pressure of economic collapse or existential war, but it is constructed from pre-existing social and political raw materials. But while the Trump era hasn't seen the rise of a true fascism in the United States, it has given us sharp and painful insights into the raw materials out of which a future American fascism might be constructed.

Any fascism of the future will be different from that of the 20th century. But it will have to share features with its forebears, including ultranationalism, illiberalism, a strong impulse to regiment society, and the forcible suppression of opposition. This fascism would, in other words, cut against what most Americans still recognize – even if only to give lip service to – as the core values of their nation.

Yet Trump's persistent hold on his base shows how a coalition against characteristically American values may be constructed and used to hold power, even if the coalition represents only a minority of the country. In particular, Trump appeals to two overlapping groups – white evangelicals and white voters motivated primarily by opposition to racial and cultural change – who each have their own reasons to embrace illiberalism and endorse the power of an illiberal state being used against their enemies.

What these groups share is a belief that their very existence is threatened. Evangelical Christian support for Trump is often motivated by the fear that secular liberals are seeking to crush Christianity and banish it from the land. Such a fear lends itself to support for an authoritarian who will crush the opposition before it gets a chance to strike first. Trump has shown that evangelicals will support anyone who even pretends to care about their motivating issues – abortion, Jerusalem, religious freedom – regardless of his obvious repugnance by any normal understanding of Christian values.

This ideology's beating heart will be a white nationalism motivated by a belief that the “true” (read: white) America is under siege from a combination of racial minorities and liberal elites. This conspiratorial worldview likewise lends itself to a support for using state power against these enemies of the people. For the future, the fact that Trump has generally been rather incompetent and unfocused at dismantling liberal democratic norms and institutions is less important than the fact that so many of his rank-and-file supporters clearly relish the idea that he might.

Some conservative thinkers have begun to lay the intellectual groundwork for the dismantling of liberalism in order to save values they consider more important, be these the defense of their version of Christian values or the defense of white cultural and political power. Among the more extreme is the Catholic writer Sorab Ahmari, who recently argued that liberalism is no longer compatible with Christianity and that the public square should be reorganized in pursuit of “the Highest Good”. Many other conservative writers are all too willing to excuse Trump’s illiberalism and racism by arguing that Trump’s enemies represent a much greater threat to their values than he does.

The scribblings of such writers are less important for the ideas they contain than for their realization that we live in a moment in which it has become possible to imagine an illiberal America, and their flirtation with the forces which might take us there. Illiberal intellectuals are starting to see the Trump movement as a force to be harnessed in pursuit of undemocratic ends. We don’t yet know the limit of what those chanting people at Trump rallies who say they want to lock people up and send them away would tolerate in practice. But we should be afraid to find out.

An American fascism would not only marry Christianity and ultranationalism through a shared belief in conspiracies aiming to destroy America, but it would also seek to retain the support of capital. Trump has demonstrated how to combine regressive economic policies with a populist image by attacking minorities and elites. Anyone promoting progressive economic reform is dismissed as a communist and hence as un-American – another one of the conspirators, and another reason to line up behind a strongman who will keep them out of power. This is why “the Squad”, who in the worldview of the right are both communists and America-hating brown people, are the perfect foil.

These are the raw materials out of which a future American fascism might be built. Such an eventuality is not only uncertain, but positively unlikely, especially in the absence of economic disaster, major war, or a devastating terrorist attack. But it is no longer unimaginable, and it will become even less so if white, Christian America continues to react to its loss of power in the same way. For this reason, the word fascist deserves its place in the political vocabulary of our time, not as a description of the present, but as a foreboding of one possible dark future.

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You can have a church or be a free woman – but having both is a struggle

Lyz Lenz, Wednesday, July 31st, 2019

After a lifetime of attending evangelical churches, **Lyz Lenz** went on a journey to find a place where she didn't need to pretend to be an obedient wife, and not much else.

Since moving to Cedar Rapids, [Iowa](#), in 2005, my husband Dave and I had attended almost 20 churches. One church we went to never invited us into a Bible study. When I asked a pastor or a Sunday school teacher about Wednesday night Bible studies, I was always told to ask someone else, who told me to ask someone else. This went on for five months, until one Sunday the pastor preached a sermon about the importance of small groups and said from the pulpit that all we had to do was ask to be invited. We never went back.

Or there was the church we visited in 2006 that sent three teams of elders to prayer walk around our townhouse. I sent them packing after I opened the door and asked them what they were doing. “Can we speak to your mom?” asked one of the older gentlemen in a suit and a tie.

“I am the mom,” I said and slammed the door shut. They left a flyer under the door and walked around our townhouse praying once more, for good measure.

After three years of searching, Dave and I finally ended up at an Evangelical Free church. There we met other couples and got involved with the youth group. But even then, that church wasn't an easy fit for us. Or, I should be clear, it wasn't an easy fit for me.

The church was a lot like the Evangelical churches Dave and I had attended as kids – raucous music, a pastor who gave sermons that often included video clips and pop culture references. There was no liturgy, there were no organs and most of the people who attended seemed to be our age. Few people drank, no one smoked and they all loved to discuss the Book of Revelation after one too many Mountain Dews at a church party.

While I loved the people there, I didn't like the church's theology. The church was and is very conservative; their theology was that of the Evangelical Free Church of America, which doesn't affirm women or gay people as pastors or elders. Strict gender roles were enforced and even seen as freeing. Everybody was white.

As someone who doesn't like to wear bras on principle, I frequently found myself chafing against the strict orthodox interpretation of the Bible and the long lectures I was often given by male members of the church about how if I believed women could be pastors I was questioning the inerrancy of the Bible.

But in those early days of my marriage and my adult life, I thought that these problems were minor squabbles. Something to be hashed out over late nights playing board games

and drinking wine, or wine for me, Fresca for the rest of them. It was a breezy naivety, born of my childhood raised in an Evangelical home-school subculture in Texas. Until I went to high school at a public school, everyone I knew believed in a literal six-day creation by the hand and voice of God. Everyone believed that being gay was a sin.

I was used to being the outsider – the lone voice of dissent. I was comfortable with this role because I wasn't threatened by it. Not yet, anyway. I wasn't gay. I wasn't a person of color. I was a woman, but the gentle grasp of patriarchy hadn't yet threatened to strangle me, because I hadn't yet tried to get free. Or perhaps I had, but I was so used to a religion that told me I was wrong and objectionable, it never occurred to me there could be another way.

Faith was also so much more to me than a God I occasionally sang songs to in church or prayed to over meals. Faith had provided the entire fabric of my existence. It was the cytoplasm in which I existed – the amniotic fluid that sustained my relationships with my husband and my family. It's the air I was raised with. My mother read the Bible to us in the mornings, and my father read it to us before I went to sleep at night. I could not conceive of myself outside of religion.

Because I could not imagine life outside the womb of my faith, I struggled inside its limitations. I thought there would always be room for me. But the reality was, there was only room for me if I made myself smaller and smaller and smaller, until I disappeared. Or else I'd be pushed out into a bright new horrible, beautiful world, where I would gasp and scream and try to breathe, for once, on my own.

But in those early days, I kicked around, trying to make my place, approaching my disagreements head on. During a membership class at our Evangelical church, the one we'd later leave, I eagerly debated the head pastor, Travis, over whether the Bible supported female ordination. My husband, who agreed with the church's stances, sat stony-faced as I recited the arguments I'd learned from my Lutheran friends and from reading books such as *Ten Lies the Church Tells Women*. The pastor gamely debated me, but stood strong. "I agree the topic needs more investigation" was all he would allow.

And I took it, that proffered breadcrumb, as a promise to journey together – to listen to one another. I took it as a sign of respect. And that's all I needed. I didn't need to be right, I just needed to be treated like someone smart, someone with something to offer besides filling a nursery volunteer spot on Sunday mornings. I needed to be treated like a person.

The promised investigation never came. That offer was just a way of putting me off, shutting me up. A year later, when I asked if we could have a Bible study that opened up the topic, I wasn't shut down, I was just ignored. I asked the question of the pastor and he smiled and said: "I'll think about it." Nothing else. And every time I brought it up, that's what I was told. "I'll think about it."

Death by a thousand maybes.

It's a passive-aggressive technique – a denial by silence. There is nothing to fight against. Just resolute lips and an unfocused gaze, that refuses to see you, your desperation, humanity and longing. I'm used to that look. I get it a lot. Or at least, I used to.

I've spent my whole life in conservative Evangelical churches. Born the second of eight kids and raised in Texas, I spent my spiritual childhood hearing hour-long sermons in humid,

brown churches filled with the Holy Spirit and brisket and pastors who sweat through their shirtsleeves proclaiming the second coming of the Lord.

In Sunday school, we looked for signs and revelations of the impending apocalypse: the tentative peace recently brokered in the Middle East, the talk of rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem, the war on religion we were told that Janet Reno was perpetuating with the attacks on Ruby Ridge and Waco. I went to sleep afraid I'd wake up to find my whole family raptured. When I went to the toilet, I prayed to Jesus not to call me up to heaven right then and there with my pants pulled down.

At home my father taught us that numerology showed Hillary Rodham Clinton's name worked out to 666. My mother made us read *The Hiding Place*, and we talked about what we'd do in the end times when we were persecuted for our faith.

I read Frank Peretti's books, hiding under the covers, dreaming about the thin veil between the spiritual world and the one where I bit my nails and prayed for Jesus to make me good. I was no good in the churches of my childhood – I was too loud, too demanding, I looked too much like a boy, I asked too many questions.

By the time I was 18 years old, I'd been in small churches where pastors slept with congregants and in megachurches where youth pastors slept with teens. I'd seen gay women kicked out of the congregations they loved because they wouldn't apologize for who God created them to be. I'd seen my friend, pregnant at 16, asked to stop singing with the worship team, while the boy who was the father still led prayers on Wednesday nights. By the time I finally went to college, I had given up. For four years, I never went to chapel. I still believed in God, but I didn't believe in church.

After I graduated and married Dave, who'd been raised in the soft evangelicalism of the upper-middle-class white midwestern suburbs, I was determined that we would find a new church together; one that fit both of us.

We moved to Cedar Rapids for his job, and the first thing he did was make a list of all the churches he wanted to visit. Without my input. In hindsight, this wasn't a good sign. But it's also how he put together our budget, planned vacations and bought cars. I had a choice – and that choice was to choose from the options on his spreadsheet. And when you are young and in love and used to the patriarchy as a *modus operandi*, well, you put up with a lot of things without thinking.

Dave and I worked through the list in alphabetical order until we finally settled into the Evangelical Free church. We weren't looking for perfection, we just wanted a home. Or, more accurately, I wanted a home. I wanted a place that would accept all of me. Where I wouldn't be forced to hide my questions and my doubts, swallow my fears and outrage and get along. Perhaps that's why, when Pastor Travis told me we'd talk about it later or that he was thinking about my idea of the Bible study examining the woman's role in the church, I took him at his word.

Compliance is easier than questioning. The appearance of unity is easier than the messy actualities. And I think part of me always understood that if I pushed too hard, I would be cast out of everything I knew. That I'd lose everything. So I smiled during sermons I hated. I kept silent during Bible studies where people spoke of dinosaurs and humans roaming the earth together before Noah's flood.

Dave and I put everything into that church. We volunteered with the youth on Wednesday nights, I helped with the coffee every Sunday and in the nursery, and we went on a trip to Israel and on a mission trip to El Salvador.

On that mission trip, everything fell apart. It fell apart because I asked to lead the prayer during devotionals one morning. Steven, the pastor leading the group, had frowned and told me that wasn't my place. I was furious. I had a specific story I wanted to share. One of our local hosts, a woman and a pastor, had taken me with her on her visits to the sick people in the village. I'd used my Spanish-English dictionary to talk to a man about how my sisters had been hit by a car, just like he had. How one of my sisters also had a hard time walking. It was a small moment of connection that I wanted to tell everyone about, and I wanted to pray for him.

But Steven was upset because I had been with a female pastor, and he didn't think it was my place to be leading even devotions in our majority male group. Steven's approach even angered Dave. When I had told Steven that nothing in the Bible prevented me from talking out loud in a small group, he replied by saying: "It's there in the scripture, right here where you are told to submit."

When Dave and I returned from the trip, we met with Pastor Travis and voiced our concerns. We had heard that other people had similar concerns with this same pastor, and I said that.

"What? Who?" Travis said.

"You know who," I said. "They told me they told you."

"No one told me anything," he said.

My husband spoke up. "We know people have talked to you about how this man treats people."

Pastor Travis bowed his head and folded his hands for a moment. When he looked up, he met my husband's eyes and said: "You are right. I don't know why I lied and I apologize to you."

"Apologize to me," I said. "You lied to me, not to him."

"I did apologize to you when I apologized to your husband," Pastor Travis replied, looking not at me but at Dave. We had been going to that church for five years together and here I was, not even worthy of an apology.

I had trusted Pastor Travis. I had believed that, even though we disagreed, he saw me as a human – smart, worthy of time and consideration. But in that moment, with his resolute lips and gaze focused somewhere over my head, I saw that I wasn't a whole person to him. I wasn't even worthy of my own apology. Whatever story I had told myself about mutual respect turned out to be just a lie. That offer to "journey together" was just a coded way of saying: "You'll eventually grow up and agree with me." It wasn't the last time I heard that phrase.

Pastor Travis and Steven did try to reach out with apologies for the misunderstandings, but I refused to speak to them. There was no misunderstanding. I thought I was a smart

person, fully capable of studying the Bible and engaging with spirituality on my own, and they disagreed. When someone denies the very core of who you are, it's hard to dialogue.

There are so many churches that remain strong while being awful to women or providing safe havens for the power hungry. And there are so many good places that close despite being a home for the hungry, the lost and the hurting. To brush off problems with churches as the problems of the inherently flawed nature of people is to miss the bigger picture: that life and faith can function together in a place where all are welcome and respected.

It's as if Hong Kong is now unmoored, so fast have the old ways unravelled

By refusing to address protesters, Carrie Lam is guilty of fuelling rising violent unrest

Luisa Lim and Ilaria Maria Sala, Sunday, July 28th, 2019

Recent scenes from Hong Kong might have come from an 1980s gangster film, with hundreds of white-shirted triad members rampaging through subway trains brutally beating all in their path with bamboo poles and metal rods.

Yet this was no movie. The police were mysteriously absent and emergency services didn't answer the 24,000 phone calls seeking help. By the end of last Sunday night, 45 people were in hospital.

The absence of authority reflects the disappearance of governance during this political crisis, which has allowed a spiral to pick up speed, shattering confidence in all that Hong Kong holds dear.

Within the space of two months, Hong Kong has remade itself into something profoundly discombobulating for its residents. Its civil service, once feted for its neutrality and professionalism, has been left floundering and riven by dissent, as hundreds of civil servants threaten industrial action if the administration continues to ignore demands to withdraw the controversial extradition bill that sparked the crisis. The judiciary, once considered neutral and impartial, has been handing down sentences that call its independence into question. The police force, once touted as Asia's finest, is widely hated, while Hong Kong's reputation as the world's safest city has been undermined.

The transport system, a model of speed and efficiency, has become the latest theatre of civil disobedience, with protesters pulling the emergency handles on subway trains in protest at the lack of protection from the operator on the night of the attacks. Aviation workers occupied the city's airport on a wildcat sit-in to spread their message to incoming visitors.

Even the ancient practice of ancestor worship has been touched by this crisis, with the controversial pro-Beijing legislator Junius Ho, who was caught on camera shaking hands with white-shirted thugs the night they ran amok, complaining that his parents' graves had been defaced with political slogans.

It is as if Hong Kong has come unmoored and the unspoken social contracts that govern life no longer hold true. The unanchoring of this city is reflected in a mass mental health crisis for residents thrown into this sudden new reality. The fallout is eroding the very institutions that distinguish Hong Kong from mainland China. So how did things unravel so quickly in one of the world's most cosmopolitan, most orderly, most law-abiding cities?

The eye of the storm is the still, silent centre of an administration that has withdrawn into itself, refusing public dialogue with protesters or students. Its initial mistake – which kicked off the firestorm of protests – was attempting to ram through legislation that would allow Beijing to extradite anyone accused of a serious criminal offence to face trial in China. In an attempt to expedite the process, the government shrank the consultation period and ignored the correct legislative process, sparking massive public outrage. After

more than a million people attended the first round of marches, the Hong Kong government has seemed to disappear from view.

The inaction of the administration has left the police, normally the agency of last resort, as the only public interface between the authorities and those they govern. That “contact” has increasingly taken the form of teargas, rubber bullets and bean bags fired at the people, as a hard core of radical protesters have stayed on after peaceful marches have dispersed, occupying streets and besieging government offices. On 1 July, they even stormed Hong Kong’s legislative council, desecrating emblems linked to China. A recent survey shows that more than 80% of marchers are sympathetic to such actions, indicating widespread radicalisation. In a rare move, the police banned one march, increasing fears that the city’s cherished freedoms are under threat.

Hong Kong’s chief executive, Carrie Lam, has said that the offending extradition bill is “dead”, but is refusing to declare that it has been withdrawn. When Lam has emerged, she has unsettled politically attuned Hongkongers. She has been seen flanked by police, praising police actions or visiting injured policemen in hospital. She has not, as yet, visited any ordinary citizens injured by the gang members. Her stiff, defensive, clearly choreographed appearances increasingly ape mainland China’s political culture.

Lam’s language has also raised hackles in Hong Kong, by blatantly adopting the political rhetoric of the mainland. After protesters defaced the national emblem of Beijing’s representative office in Hong Kong, she accused them of “hurting the feelings” of 1.4 billion Chinese people and of challenging Beijing’s sovereignty. Such phrases are completely alien to the political lexicon of Hong Kong. More predictably, Beijing has been shrill, angrily blaming “foreign forces” for the unrest and issuing veiled threats that the People’s Liberation Army could be called in to restore order.

The breakdown in governance has undermined the administration’s performance legitimacy, while Hongkongers, through their acts of civil disobedience, have shown they are withdrawing their consent to be governed. In truth, that consent was always resting on the promise of future political reform and the well-worn mantra of “one country, two systems”. But the past 22 years under Chinese rule have shown that this formula was never an equation: one country always took precedence over two systems.

As the Hong Kong government barricades itself in, pro-Beijing forces have filled the leadership gap with violence: the lawlessness of the thugs, the institutionalised violence of the police force. This has fuelled a weekend insurgency among a very small number of radical protesters, whose methods are increasingly supported by desperate and disenchanting peaceful demonstrators.

In the absence of dialogue, violence is the only conversation between the two sides and every weekend the stakes are ratcheted higher. Nobody can predict what Hong Kong will look like at the end of the summer. What is certain, though, is that the city can no longer return to the way it once was.

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