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Trump and Authoritarianism

By Bernard Weiner

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All over the globe, including here in the U.S., there is a resurgence of muscular authoritarian politics. How that trend unfolds and is enforced varies country by country, but the core is recognizably neo-fascist, to a lesser or greater degree, often emerging from the extreme right wing. This rise of authoritarianism is as true in Turkey as it is in Russia, in the turbulent greater Middle East as it is in the Philippines — and, of course, as it is in the Trump movement in America.

To be sure, there are occasional left-wing strongmen as well, but these days, most of the autocratic rulers seem to congregate on the far-right edge of the political spectrum. It behooves those of us dedicated to the viability of democratic institutions to try to understand the genesis of this rising authoritarian movement in order to better counter its brutal programs and policies and its scary growth.

In this essay, I'll be focusing on what's happening in the U.S., and pointing to a commonality on the global scale.

“STOP THE WORLD, I WANT TO GET OFF!”

The major changes taking place all over the world — in technology, in medicine, in income inequality, in gender roles, in the law, in sexual mores, in world trade, and so on — are coming

at all of us with such rapidity that it's almost dizzying. American society likewise is undergoing these ground-breaking changes at near-warp speed.

The upcoming generation, especially those in their 20s and 30s, seems more comfortable in adapting to these rapid sociological/technological shifts. Older citizens, possibly more frightened by rapid change, often seek succor in the old-fashioned mores and verities and behaviors. *Status quo ante* as comfort food, so to speak. Demagogues and would-be autocrats — in the U.S., read: Trump — play on that fear of rapid change, and promise a return to a (mostly fictional) quieter, less-chaotic time and pace, when everything and everybody kept to their ordained place. Those well-ordered societies didn't feel the need to deal with seismic shifts in demographic and economic trends or with issues arising from waves of new immigrants. The order-imposers, the police, were, if not universally respected, universally feared and obeyed, no questions asked. In today's cell-phone-camera world, tweeting millennials are demolishing that old-school paradigm.

THE LEADER ON A WHITE HORSE

When societies seem to be spinning out of control, when the traditional center no longer holds, when citizens' frustrations and fears reach critical mass, the temptation arises to fall behind a leader promising a rescue by cracking heads and bringing rigid order to roiling societies: the stereotyped strongman on a white horse.

In the 1930s in key countries, it was a Hitler in Germany, a Mussolini in Italy, a Stalin in the USSR, a Franco in Spain, et al. In our own time, it's a Putin in Russia, an Erdogan in Turkey, a Xi in China, a Thaksin in Thailand, a Mugabe in Zimbabwe, a Duterte in the Philippines, an al-Sisi in Egypt — and, our own homegrown Mussolini in America, Donald J. Trump. It must be understood that these authoritarians often differ widely in their origins (Erdogan, for example, assumed power through elections) and methods of operation, degree of brutality, etc. Every society has a multiplicity of forces affecting its manner of governance. There is no one template that explains the various expressions of authoritarianism across the globe. But there are enough similarities to draw some tentative conclusions.

*For example, there is often a strong religious component: fundamentalism in the U.S., militant Islam in many Moslem countries. Religion provides certainty, simple answers, a set of strict norms and social mores.

*There is often a dread fear of "The Other," outsiders, foreigners. Immigrants and minorities — and women — often bear the brunt of this fear. *There often is a fear of change brought about by developments in science and technology. Many authoritarian rulers crack down on sources of information they can't easily control: the internet, the press, social media, etc.

*Because reality is so frightening and frustrating, authoritarians invent their own realities. (Remember the George W. Bush adviser who justified the administration's lies and arrogance with this assertion: "You are part of the old reality-based culture; we are an empire now; we make our own reality?")

*Those with authoritarian proclivities tend to look to a strong, domineering leader to carry them over the shoals of their disorienting confusions and their inchoate angers and frustrations.

*These followers tend to see these charismatic leaders as generally flawless. What they assert is accepted as truth. And they don't tell lies. When the leader they trust is caught out having told lies, he is excused because his lie is in the service of his justifiable agenda or is deemed excusable because his behavior is sanctioned by religious faith.

HARD-WIRED FOR AUTHORITARIANISM

Conservatives have a “heightened psychological need to manage uncertainty,” notes one social researcher quoted by John W. Dean in his insightful 2006 book “Conservatives Without Conscience.” Authoritarianism and fundamentalism, you see, seem to provide a safe harbor, a simple “quiet” way in the midst of all the world’s ambiguity and “noise,” that helps in dealing with the frightening and contradictory cacophony outside the religion. There is good and there is evil, a right way and a wrong way, Revealed Truth and dangerous falsehood, you’re with us or with our enemies, that sort of simplistic understanding of the world. “Gott mit Uns” — God is on our side, so why should we compromise with or pay attention to those who do not believe in The Truth?

But, says Dean, in addition to the doctrinal underpinnings, something in the personality of many fundamentalist religious leaders, and their followers, may be working even more strongly: a built-in tendency toward authoritarianism. He quotes from voluminous studies by social psychologist/researcher Bob Altemeyer, who — after examining the attitude of tens of thousands of subjects in interviews and questionnaires — concluded that “acceptance of traditional religious beliefs appear to have more to do with having a personality rich in authoritarian submission, authoritarian aggression, and conventionalism, than with the beliefs per se.” So keep this in mind when observing how primed-for-violence Trump supporters, egged on by The Donald himself, treat those opposed to their point of view.

As I write this, Trump, according to recent polls, is within the margin of error in many key states. It is not impossible to believe that despite his daily outrageous statements — or maybe because of those outbursts (after all, he is The Finger to the elites so reviled by his base) — he could amass enough Electoral College electors to actually become President.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

That Trumpian base, loaded with angry, frustrated, authoritarian-hungry citizens — may hang with him, through thin and thin, all the way to November. It appears he was voicing a major truth months ago when he said he could shoot someone on Fifth Avenue and his polling numbers would not go down. These are true believers. Those die-hard Trump supporters seem impervious to traditional, logical attempts to change their minds, so, how can those of us who believe in old-fashioned liberal democracy make a dent in his support?

*The post-conventions Democratic plan appears to have abandoned those ordinary strategies dependent on logic and instead is taking dead-aim at traditional conservative (“moderate”)

Republicans who are appalled by their party's nominee and embarrassed to be associated with him. Maybe they can be peeled away for this one election to vote for Hillary Clinton or, if not that, to at least stay home on Election Day. *One would like to believe that eventually Trump — an insecure, ignorant narcissist — will keep shooting himself in the foot to the point where he reaches a tipping point and down he goes. But we can't count on Trump doing the work for us.

*A further-out hypothesis: Trump will never accept "loser" status and he doesn't really want to have to do the hard work of being the president; he has to be the victim of nefarious forces aligned against him. So he keeps on keeping on until he's dropped or loses, and he can blame those people who knifed him in the electoral back. With his supporters in place, he can then remain the major domo of the extremist right, with his very own storm troopers. *No, as Bernie Sanders reminded us, our current political-revolution battle is not only about who gets the most electoral and popular votes on November 8, but who is also willing to stay organized and push the revolution/reform ball forward to combat the authoritarian cohort and push them to the political sidelines. Unless we do that, our work will have been largely in vain as new, more-sophisticated Donald Trumps emerge to drag our democracy downward into the mud of bad history.

That's why the down-ballot voting is so important. Retaking the Senate and House would be an enormous head start in the electoral/political battle. But even if Trump and the other extremists are denied an electoral victory, the struggle continues on November 9.

Organize. Organize! ORGANIZE!