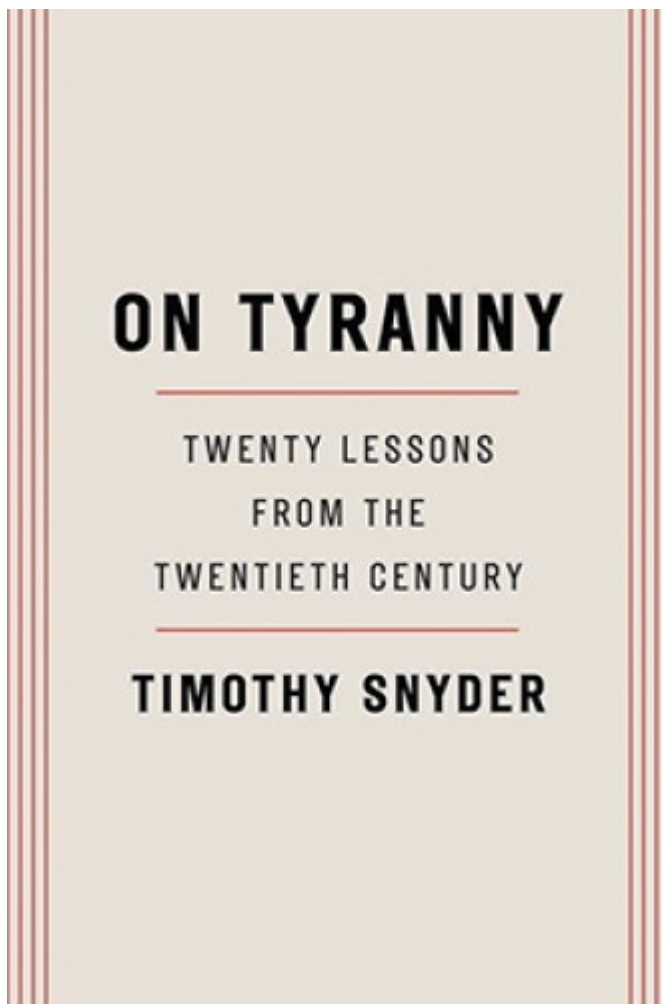


Trump is a threat to democracy. How can we defend it?

The authoritarian nationalism of the 20th century never quite died. And Americans now aren't wiser than Europeans then.

by [Gary Dorrien](#) in the [June 21, 2017](#) issue

In Review



On Tyranny

Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century

By Timothy Snyder

Penguin Crown

A candidate for president of the United States formally launches his campaign by demonizing undocumented Mexican immigrants and demanding a 30-foot wall along the entire U.S.-Mexican border. He swells his following by attacking the free press as an enemy and hangs demeaning nicknames on all his rivals. He lies repeatedly about urban crime rates and urban voter fraud. He refuses all customary vetting of his taxes and financial holdings and conducts ugly rallies punctuated by violence.

He seals his triumph in the primaries by proposing to ban all Muslims from entering the United States. He urges his crowds to chant about imprisoning the Democratic candidate and promises to punish judges who oppose his illegal and unconstitutional mandates. He tells the Republican Convention that he alone can solve America's problems. He praises dictators, especially Russia's dictator, and denigrates democratic leaders. When charged by many women of sexual abuse, he claims that all are lying, even though he has boasted of sexually assaulting women.

In office, he governs as he campaigned. He uses the presidency to enrich his family, claiming he is above the law. He fills his cabinet with plutocrats and appoints a white nationalist as a top adviser. He bashes the news media. His rallies continue to feature crude repetitions, personal attacks on nonsupporters, and appeals to "the people" (meaning only the people who support him). Persistently he acknowledges as true or real only whatever serves his immediate interest. He fires the FBI director for investigating too vigorously Russia's role in the 2016 election.

What are we witnessing? How closely does this picture resemble the crash of democracies across Europe in the 1930s? If the latter question seems out-of-bounds, at what point does it become in bounds? And when does it become too late to ring the alarm?

Yale historian Timothy Snyder has been writing books for 25 years on how democracies perished in Eastern and Central Europe in the 1930s. He does not believe that history repeats itself or that the current American president is an

outright fascist. On the other hand, he believes the nation has never been an exception to history and thinks believing in American exceptionalism at this moment is dangerous. The parallels between Europe then and the United States today are alarming to Snyder, so shortly after the 2016 election he posted a Facebook entry about how to defend liberal democracies from tyrants. He offered 20 lessons, the post went viral, and soon there was a book version: *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*.

Some of Snyder's lessons are prosaic, such as, "Make eye contact and small talk." "Take responsibility for the face of the world" is about hate symbols, and "Be kind to our language" is a plea to think and speak for oneself. Some lessons focus on personal habits that turn out to be crucially important, since institutions survive only when individuals do the little things that make them work: "Establish a private life, stand out, listen for dangerous words, contribute to good causes." One lesson, "Remember professional ethics," is a reminder to lawyers, physicians, and bureaucrats that their obligation to a professional code of ethics outranks civil obedience as a virtue. Lessons 1, 2, 5, 19, and 20 are especially important: "Do not obey in advance," "Defend institutions," "Believe in truth," "Be a patriot," and "Be as courageous as you can be."

"Do not obey in advance" and "Defend institutions" go together, surpassing everything else, because tyrants gain most of their power via anticipatory obedience and because institutions do not protect themselves. Snyder stresses that Adolf Hitler was able to abolish German democracy shortly after his election in January 1933 because masses of ordinary Germans voluntarily rolled over for him in "heedless acts of conformity." They let Hitler have their rights and institutions for an emergency season, only to learn that tyrants do not restore them. Something similar happened in March 1938, when Austrian officials and citizens obediently let the Nazis have their way with Austrian Jews, and in 1941, when the Nazi secret service commenced mass killings that took German obedience for granted and could not have occurred without it, and in 1946, when Czechoslovakians elected a communist government that swiftly ended democratic elections in Czechoslovakia.

Snyder cautions that Germans were not exceptionally obedient and that tyranny takes a variety of political forms. Yale psychologist Stanley Milgram's famous experiments in 1961 showed that Yale students and New Haven citizens were willing to electrically shock others repeatedly to the point of (apparently) killing them, on the basis of an authoritative directive, with no expression of sympathy or remorse.

Milgram had wanted to study the roots of German obedience; local obedience turned out to be more revealing.

This is a dangerous moment to believe in American exceptionalism.

On tyranny, Snyder belongs to the Hannah Arendt school of totalitarian theory, conceiving the Nazi and Soviet communist regimes as similar responses to economic crises and the failures of liberal democracies to address them. In his best-known book, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (2010), Snyder focused on the borderlands between the Third Reich and the Soviet Union, treating the Holocaust and the Stalinist starvation of Ukrainian kulaks as equivalent evils. More recently, in *Black Earth: The Holocaust as History and Warning* (2015), Snyder doubled down on his controversial contention that the Holocaust should not be viewed as singularly evil. Hitler, in this telling, annihilated the Jews to attain as much agricultural land as possible—solving the problems of food scarcity and dwindling resources—not because he was crazed by anti-Jewish hatred.

On Tyranny mercifully lays aside Snyder's intensely disputed argument about Hitler's motivation. Here, as in Arendt's usage, Snyder's focus on totalitarian rule affords an evenhanded ideological posture: the left and right are equally capable of totalitarian tyranny, and the same freedom-loving lessons apply in both cases.

Communism featured a disciplined party elite that monopolized reason and social planning in the name of a universal myth of deliverance from capitalist civilization. Fascism, a species of radical authoritarian nationalism defined by strongman politics, dictatorial rule, corporatist control of industry, suppression of dissent, and the mobilization of society, rejected reason in the name of a glorious myth of national will. Fascist leaders put a face on antiliberalism, prizing their ability to forge unified militaristic societies. Italy was the first to go fascist in 1922. Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria sided with Germany after it went fascist, lured by trade and territory. By 1940, Hitler and his allies controlled all of Europe except Britain. They would have remained in control had Hitler not lusted to conquer Russia.

Snyder notes that Britain under Winston Churchill disrupted Hitler merely by forcing him to change his plans. Invading the Soviet Union and colonizing its western territories had always been Hitler's plan, even when he and Stalin were allies. Britain forced Hitler to fight a two-front war he had not expected. Then the Russians thwarted the German war machine at a staggering human cost, the Allies liberated

the Nazi death camps, and it seemed that fascism was dead as an ideological option.

The fascists' legacy, says Snyder, "grows more relevant by the day."

We need to know this history, Snyder says, because the latter illusion turned out to be spectacularly wrong. The fascists left behind a legacy "that grows more relevant by the day." Moreover, Western celebrants were equally wrong in 1989 when they proclaimed that the death of communism ended the battles of ideology.

Authoritarian nationalism was never as dead as it seemed, and liberal democracy was never as triumphant as its celebrants claimed. The winning campaign in the 2016 presidential election brandished an American version of every trope that defines authoritarian nationalism.

Snyder leans on Arendt's contention that totalitarianism was an invention of the 20th century. Totalitarianism began when citizens lost their right to a private life. More precisely, totalitarianism was, and is, the erasure of the difference between private and public life. If you cannot have a private exchange with friends and family that remains private, you do not have a private life. If you cannot keep your private life private, you are not free. Snyder worries that the Internet cultivates a totalitarian mind-set in those it lures into addiction.

Personal habits loom large in his argument. It's important, Snyder says, to be wary of paramilitaries and to understand the difference between patriotism and nationalism. But it's no less important to scrub your computer regularly for malware, get away from your computer, read some books, get outdoors, figure things out for yourself, hold in-person conversations, and be calm when bad things happen. The worst things happen after people freeze in fear at the occurrence of bad things. The ultimate example is the burning of the Reichstag in March 1933. Germans did not have to forfeit their democracy to Hitler just because somebody set the Reichstag on fire. But longtime habits of obeying in advance and caving in to fearmongers, plus 12 years of indulging reactionary tripe against the Weimar Republic, made Germans vulnerable to Hitler's opportunism, exactly as he expected.

On Tyranny is strangely silent about racism, hardly a minor topic then or now. Snyder ignores how even the Nazis were selective about when and where they vented their race hatred, a concession to polite society that swelled Hitler's respectability in church circles on his way to power. Snyder is similarly silent about Trump's odious leadership of the birther campaign, which was too blatantly racist to

be called a dog whistle, and his ludicrous claim that black Americans had nothing to lose and thus nothing to lose by supporting him. Whites must stop assuming that their political liberalism exempts them from interrogating why race mattered and matters. White racism has been the rocket fuel—though not the chief cause—of every form of authoritarian nationalism to gain power in the past century, and it still is.

To Snyder, cultivating a spiritual life or having a religious faith does not count for much, although cultivating individuality is all-important. His only pass at a religious reference comes at the end of his chapter on books worth reading, where the Bible makes the list. Snyder's canon of valuable authors is long on politically oriented, moderate, secular, European antitotalitarians: Arendt, George Orwell, Albert Camus, Czesław Miłosz, Eugène Ionesco, Leszek Kołakowski, Václav Havel, Tony Judt, and Timothy Garton Ash. Among novels he commends are Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* and Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. He is ambivalent about Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here*, but he likes the title.

It can happen here because Americans are not wiser than Europeans. *On Tyranny* observes that President Trump's 2016 campaign was flagrantly nationalist because it told Americans their worst qualities made them great. Echoing Orwell, Snyder notes that nationalists brood endlessly about power, victory, defeat, and revenge, while paying little heed to what happens in the real world. Patriots, by contrast, want their nation to live up to its ideals, "which means asking us to be our best selves." Snyder's riff on Trump's authoritarian nationalism contrasts it with genuine patriotism:

It is not patriotic to compare one's search for sexual partners in New York with the military service in Vietnam that one has dodged. It is not patriotic to avoid paying taxes, especially when American working families do pay. It is not patriotic to ask those working, taxpaying American families to finance one's own presidential campaign, and then to spend their contributions in one's own companies. It is not patriotic to admire foreign dictators.

Interviewers have naturally raised with Snyder the question: "Does that mean Trump is a fascist?" Snyder laments that Americans lack almost any language for talking about this question because they assume all Americans are democratic pluralists

until proven otherwise. And as soon as “proven otherwise” occurs, Americans have no vocabulary for the alternatives. Merely raising the issue compels many Americans to prematurely deny that 1930s-era fascism has any relevance for today’s politics. Others take comfort in noting that Trump has no uniformed youth movement behind him, he did not create a political party of his own, and his hostile takeover of the Republican Party poses daily legislative challenges for him.

Snyder, however, takes very little comfort in the checklist remainders. In March he told National Public Radio: “We’re in a shocking situation where there are far more negative things that one could also cite, like, for example, that the president basically never says he supports democracy. The president has never given any indication that he understands or respects the rule of law and the things that the presidents have done so far. And this speaks directly, I think, to the central threat.”

The central threat is that Trump substitutes a fantasy world of his making for the real one. This is the number one defining mark of the fascist temperament, which made it possible for fascists of the 1930s to achieve their goals: “Fascism says what you and I experience as facts or what reporters experience as facts are irrelevant. All that matters are impressions and emotions and myths. And so when the president and his aides set out to create a world of alternative factuality, that is the catalyst which helps us slide from one system to another.”

On Tyranny puts it more analytically, citing Victor Klemperer, a Romance languages scholar who chronicled Germany’s descent into fascist barbarism. Klemperer said truth died in four modes in Nazi Germany, and Snyder says the same thing is happening today in the United States. The first mode is to be openly hostile to empirical reality, brandishing fabrications and lies as facts, which the president does “at a high rate and at a fast pace.” Number two is shamanistic incantation, the constant repetition of crude smears and slogans such as “Lyin’ Ted,” “Crooked Hillary,” and “Lock her up.” Number three is magical thinking, a byproduct of exalting feelings over reason, such that one believes contradictory things and one’s own fabrications. Number four is misplaced faith, as in “I alone can solve it,” an oracular idea of truth impervious to evidence. Snyder is old-school about reason and evidence, pleading: “Post-truth is pre-fascism.” His lessons are decidedly personal, small-bore, and insistently empirical, eschewing the willful language of heroism, until he gets to the end. His 20th lesson, “Be as courageous as you can,” offers a single sentence of commentary: “If none of us is prepared to die for freedom, then all of us will die under tyranny.”

Recently Snyder made news by contending it's "pretty much inevitable" that some version of the Reichstag fire moment is coming. Trump will declare a state of emergency that nullifies democratic institutions and usurps as much control of the government as he can get. It's hard to imagine that Trump will not take the path of the dictators he admires, since he does not respect democratic institutions and does not take counsel from anyone outside the realm of military affairs. Snyder is right to stress the indispensable importance of early resistance—opposition that from the beginning assumes the worst without getting hysterical or panicked.

But Snyder's persistently small-bore lessons reflect the Internet purview he otherwise disdains. He underplays the necessity of building a resistance movement that asks rude questions, challenges normal politics, does not delay out of politeness or caution, and creates new organizations demanding equality and democratic accountability.

On Tyranny says nothing about the Bernie Sanders presidential campaign, which drew enormous crowds, and almost nothing about economic injustice. Sanders spoke directly to voters in both parties left behind by corporate capitalism and the power of Wall Street. Sanders understood that exhortations about thinking your own thoughts, making eye contact, and cultivating a private life will not hold off the onslaught of authoritarian nationalism. He understood the economic pain ravaging America's working-class communities and the imperative of speaking to it. He was a flawed candidate. He had no music in him, he radiated Old Left economism, and he never broke through to most African Americans. But the Sanders campaign represented the heart of a resistance that will thwart America's drift into authoritarian nationalism—if it is thwarted—and for reasons not mentioned in Snyder's 20 lessons: it is a democratic movement that grasps why authoritarian nationalism is surging and understands the anger of Trump voters against a system that does not work for the majority.

The lessons of the 1930s are indeed pertinent for our moment. But Snyder barely mentions that the ravages of capitalist inequality and breakdown were the chief drivers of the political catastrophes of the 1930s. The social democratic tradition and the trade union movement that inform Sanders are unknown to the readers Snyder envisions, so he provides pithy lessons about breaking free of the consumer herd. Snyder never mentions that the United States had ample experience with fascist movements before and during the crash of European democracies. Franklin Roosevelt had to fight off fascist currents in his own party to make the federal

government work for hurting working-class and middle-class people. The New Deal was so successful that a succeeding generation regarded Social Security as an American birthright. The Democratic Party at the time routinely advocated universal government health coverage.

Authoritarian nationalism is best opposed by a democratic alternative.

On Tyranny takes no position on what it would take to sway a significant segment of the angry, alienated, hurting, white working class away from authoritarian nationalist politics. Presumably, and quite plausibly, this question is not helpful in the immediate crisis. The imperative of the moment is to defend democratic institutions.

But no democracy can perpetually survive gross disparities in economic and social conditions. The United States is hurtling faster toward authoritarian nationalism than its European counterparts because it has never established more than a minimum of a social democracy. In every nation with a social democratic tradition, everyone's health care is covered, the power of private money in the political system is curtailed, and nearly everyone recognizes that there is such a thing as an intolerable level of economic inequality. In the United States, millions have no health coverage, private money dominates the political system, and nothing is done to stem staggering inequalities of income and wealth.

White working-class voters have come to hate the federal government because they believe it does nothing to help them. Authoritarian nationalism at least speaks to their distress. What's needed is a substantive, democratic alternative.

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