

Democratic Lies and Fascist Lies

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At the basis of the discourse ethics of democratic deliberation is respect for the equality of one's fellow citizen, including one's political opponents. Such respect involves treating them as a fellow reasoner, responsive to the force of the better argument. One's political opponent is deserving of this sort of equal respect – and this respect manifests itself *epistemically*, and in *discourse*. In a healthy democratic culture, we try to win our opponents over by the force of reason.

Liberal democracy relies on the twin values of freedom and equality. Fascist ideology, by contrast, firmly repudiates equality – its pillar is inequality. Fascism is a cult of the leader, who promises national restoration in the face of supposed humiliation brought on by minorities, immigrants, liberals, and communists. In fascist politics, equality is represented as means to humiliate the supposedly naturally dominant group, and, ultimately, as a means for a hated minority to take over power. In fascist politics, equality is a charade and a mask.

Typically, when political scientists discuss fascism, they tend to focus on fascist regimes. In my work on fascism, I have focused instead on features of a fascist *culture*.ⁱ We can and should worry about a growing fascist culture, even in a regime that remains a liberal democracy. A growing fascist culture makes it difficult to reap the benefits of liberal democratic culture, even if the structure of democratic institutions – courts and elections, for example – remains in place.

A democratic culture prizes equality and equal respect. In contrast, fascist culture is based around a friend/enemy distinction. In fascist ideology, one's political opponent is not an epistemic peer, to be won over via the force of reason. Rather, they are to be dominated and defeated. Gathering supporters, in a fascist culture, involves drumming up fear of one's opponents, and exhibiting to supporters the strength and power that demonstrates one will achieve eventual victory over this fearsome enemy.

My aim in this short piece is use this distinction between liberal democratic culture and fascist culture to illuminate the distinction between the kind of lying one finds politicians engaged in during fairly normal democratic times, and the kind of lying (if that is what it is) that occurs when fascist culture has made significant inroads.ⁱⁱ Fascism's friend/enemy ideology underlies its vexed relationship with truth.

1. Friend/Enemy

Fascist movements portray themselves as the defenders of tradition, often religious tradition – be it Christianity, Hinduism, or Judaism – from an existential threat against civilization's traditional moral code. The enemy are liberals, intellectuals, communists, feminists, homosexuals, and despised ethnic or religious minority groups, who supposedly work in tandem to destroy traditional patriarchal religious values. The enemy is portrayed monstrously – as engaged in an attempt to subvert the nation's institutions and media to destroy traditional values, and as in a kind of conspiracy with the worst criminals imaginable.

Here is Nazi Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels, from his speech "Communism with the mask off", delivered to the Annual Congress of the Nazi Party on September 13, 1935:

Bolshevism is explicitly determined on bringing about a revolution among all the nations. In its own essence it has an aggressive and international tendency. But National Socialism confines itself to Germany and is not a product for export, either in its abstract or practical characteristics. Bolshevism denies religion as a principle, fundamentally and entirely. It recognizes religion only as an “opium for the people.” For the help and support of religious belief, however, National Socialism absolutely places in the foreground of its program a belief in God...But the Bolsheviks carry on a campaign, directed by the Jews, with the international underworld, against culture as such. Bolshevism is not merely anti-bourgeois; it is against human civilization itself.

In its final consequences it signifies the destruction of all the commercial, social, political and cultural achievements of Western Europe, in favor of a deracinated and nomadic international cabal which has found its representation in Judaism.

In this speech, Nazis are the defenders of “the commercial, social, political and cultural achievements of Western Europe,” religion, and indeed “human civilization itself” from the threat of “a deracinated and nomadic international cabal which has found its representation in Judaism.” Later in the speech, Goebbels addresses the tactics of these enemies of civilization: “Murder of individuals, murder of hostages and mass murder are the favorite means applied by Bolshevism to get rid of all opposition to its propaganda.” What follows this is a lurid list of atrocities attributed to Jewish Bolsheviks.

Goebbels' speech is shot through with lies. But considering simply the *content* of these lies misses the effect of the speech. Goebbels tells his audience, "Bolsheviks carry on a campaign, directed by the Jews, with the international underworld, against culture as such. Bolshevism is not merely anti-bourgeois; it is against human civilization itself." Terms like "culture" and "human civilization" are used as contrast words for the aims and goals of the Jewish Bolsheviks. On the side of Bolshevism and Jews is "the international underworld" – whatever that is. On the side of National Socialism are all the achievements of Europe, and indeed "human civilization itself". Goebbels's narrative presupposes that culture, and even human civilization, are Aryan. The contrastive use of terms in Goebbels's narrative is part of the systematic dehumanization of Jews.

Conversations occur with narrative structures in their backgrounds. Goebbels' speech urges a narrative structure in which culture and human civilization are Aryan, and are diametrically opposing values to the value system of Jews. The obviously false content of the speech is not its main communicative point. Its main communicative point lies in the narrative structure it conveys.

As Tamsin Shaw has made clear in a recent essay on US Attorney General William Barr, we find such friend-enemy distinctions clearly in the ideology and speeches of members of the Trump administration.ⁱⁱⁱ In a speech delivered at the University of Notre Dame on October 11, 2019, Barr said:

Modern secularists dismiss this idea of morality as other-worldly superstition imposed by a kill-joy clergy. In fact, Judeo-Christian moral standards are the ultimate utilitarian rules for human conduct. They reflect the rules that are best for man, not in the by and by, but

in the here and now. They are like God's instruction manual for the best running of man and human society. By the same token, violations of these moral laws have bad, real-world consequences for man and society.... Suffice it to say that the campaign to destroy the traditional moral order has brought with it immense suffering, wreckage, and misery. And yet, the forces of secularism, ignoring these tragic results, press on with even greater militancy.

Barr presents the Trump administration as the only hope against increased militant secularism, out to destroy the very fabric of moral order itself. In Barr's speech, opponents of the Trump administration are opponents of civilization itself. One day later, President Donald Trump gave a speech at the Value Voters Summit, in which he also echoed Goebbels:

You are the warriors on the frontiers defending American freedom. We meet tonight at a crucial moment in our nation's history. Our shared values are under assault like never before. Extreme left-wing radicals, both inside and outside government, are determined to shred our Constitution and eradicate the beliefs we all cherish. Far-left socialists are trying to tear down the traditions and customs that made America the greatest nation on Earth. They reject the principles of our Founding Fathers — principles enshrined into the Declaration of Independence, which proclaims that our rights come from our creator.

In this speech, Trump presents his opponents as “the radical left” out to destroy the moral fabric of civilization. And he presents himself as the only solution.

A successful narrative structure that seeks to implement a pure friend-enemy distinction is often self-reinforcing, leading people who are guided by it to take evidence against it as further evidence supporting it. If you are under the influence of a narrative involving a mysterious global communist elite that controls the media, you might take an article in the media providing evidence that the source from which you have borrowed this narrative structure is fraudulent to be itself more evidence for the narrative. In his book The Jewish Enemy: Nazi Propaganda during World War II and the Holocaust, Jeffrey Herf writes that “Nazis focused [in their propaganda] on the supposed Jewish domination of German professional life, despite the conflicting reality.” Despite the antisemitic myth that Jews controlled the press, Jews accounted for only 5.1% of editors and writers – nor was there any sense to be made of domination in the arts, e.g. Jews accounted for only 2.4 percent of visual artists. “The Jews’ small numbers, economic vulnerability, and lack of political influence were mere surface phenomena. The truth was that a small number of unseen conspirators hidden in the wings controlled international events” – and arranged for the surface appearances to be misleading – according to Hitler, “Jews were masters in the art of deception.”^{iv}

The narrative structure of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion is that there is a secretive global elite, who are Jewish. Their loyalty is just to other Jews and not to the nations in which they find themselves; they control the media, the culture industry, the universities, and the banks. They use the language of liberalism and social justice hypocritically in the media they control - to urge for looser and looser immigration laws, for example, or equality for racial minorities, and sexual minorities, all with one single-minded goal: to destroy tradition – first, the dominant position of

the nation's traditional race, by intermarriage or, worse, rape, and, secondly, the traditional family. Their ultimate end goal is communism, including seizure of all private property.

If audience members have this narrative structure in their background, one can exploit that fact in various kinds of indirect political messages. One could *dog whistle* antisemitism, by making salient enough of its structure that there is no need to mention Jews to anyone who has assimilated the narrative. Such a person would understand, by virtue of presupposing the narrative, that Jews were meant.

One could also repeat the narrative, replacing Jews by some other group, perhaps Muslims. It's not far off to describe Islamophobia in the United States in terms of a narrative structure involving Muslim Americans as a fifth-column whose loyalty is really to other Muslims, and not to fellow citizens. Part of this narrative, echoing the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, is that Muslims and their liberal allies urge lax immigration laws in the name of social justice, but their *real* purpose is to undermine Christianity. According to this narrative, the left – the socialists and their ilk - have appropriated the cause of Muslim equality, and, using their control of the media and universities, are advancing social justice messages that are really attacks on Judeo-Christian tradition. The narrative structure of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion is familiar to many – that there is a shadowy group that controls the media, and uses appeals to universal principles of justice as a means to displace dominant groups and seize power, and that ultimately the goal is to destroy the dominant group – e.g. white Christians, and replace it with communism, socialism, or even Shariah Law. It is easily deployable against other targets, such as homosexuals.

Goebbels' speech is typical of much of Nazi propaganda in presenting civilization as an Aryan product, and Nazis its only defenders against a deadly outside threat. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler declares that

... all that we admire on this earth – science, art, technical skill and invention – is the creative product of only a small number of nations ... All this culture depends on them for its very existence ... If we divide the human race into three categories – founders, maintainers, and destroyers of culture – the Aryan stock alone can be considered as representing the first category.

In a similar vein, the French fascist Guillaume Faye, author of the 2001 book Why we Fight: Manifesto of the European Resistance, insists that “[t]he contribution European civilization (including its American prodigal) has made to the history of humanity surpasses, in every domain, that of every other people.” And one can find gentler versions of this idea being promoted by European far-right politicians who have long since gained respectability.

Consider the concept of “European Enlightenment,” which has no singular philosophical meaning. As a taxonomical category, it could include philosophers as fundamentally opposed different as Hume and Kant. Some of its figures, not least Kant, were the chief proponents of concepts that fascists roundly reject (namely, universal human dignity).

Nonetheless, European far-right politicians have subtly adopted talk of the Enlightenment as a way to smuggle in more bald-faced claims of European superiority. For example, Antwerp

Mayor Bart De Wever, an outspoken Flemish nationalist, recently started referring to the Enlightenment as “the software” of “the grand narrative of European culture.” Borrowing from British philosopher Roger Scruton, he argues that “the European Enlightenment” and nationalism are complementary, rather than opposed. In De Wever, one finds significant overlaps with Faye. For example, both condemn liberalism and socialism as leading to “open borders,” “safe spaces,” “laws that protect feelings,” and the dissolution of parental authority.

Nazi propaganda has some of the most extreme examples of friend-enemy narratives, with no ambiguity. There is no complexity in the characters in Goebbels’ speech – the Judeo-Bolsheviks that are the sworn enemy of “human civilization” are completely dehumanized. Jeffrey Herf writes, “[f]rom the foundation of the Nazi Party to Hitler’s rantings in a Berlin bunker in 1945, the key themes in the regime’s antisemitic story line were righteous indignation about victimization at the hands of a powerful and evil foe, promises of retaliation, and projection of aggressive genocidal intent onto others.” The purity of the friend-enemy distinctions drawn in Nazi propaganda reflects the centrality of the friend-enemy distinction to its ideology. The intended effect of this propaganda is to create fear of the enemy, and promote the desire for revenge against them.

At the core of fascist ultra-nationalism is the thought that one group deserves greater status, due to a past history of military and cultural achievement and domination, with mixture with other cultures represented as the destruction of its possibility. In National Socialism, this kind of ultra-nationalism had a foundation in social Darwinism – the “Aryan race” had supposedly proven their superiority over other groups in its past cultural and military achievements, and the threat of

race-mixing was a way to destroy Aryans, and with them, the very possibility of culture and civilization. But there are other ways to undergird a hierarchy of value besides appealing to a supposed past victory in military and cultural struggle. Appeals to God's plan, or other aspect of religious ideology, can do the work that social Darwinism did in Hitler's ideology. And many religions involve a structure of authority that resembles the role of a leader in fascist ideology; such ideological commonalities explain the pattern of history, where conservative religious movements ally with ultra-nationalist fascist movements, as we see now in countries like India and Poland.^v We can therefore speak of religious versions of essentially fascist ideology, even though such ideologies are not based in pseudo-scientific appeals to social Darwinism. These ideologies, too, could undergird an anti-democratic culture in which political opponents are not equals, but fundamental enemies.

2. From Friend/Enemy to Fascist Lies

A democratic culture has equality as its base. One's political opponent must be convinced via reason, rather than dominated. In contrast, in a fascist culture, politics is militarized. The fascist political leader represents their political opponent as the vanguard of a conspiracy that seeks the ultimate destruction of the dominant group, its removal and replacement from power. Politics is a field of battle, not of reason. The democratic face of reason, in fascist ideology, is a mere façade. To take one's opponent at face-value, as an honest interlocuter, is already to have lost the game, as it were.

In a fascist political culture, a leader has several related goals. One is to delegitimize democratic equality by representing one's opponent, typically via a conspiracy theory, as fundamentally antithetical to civilization. Another is to exhibit power to one's supporters, to show them one can get away with extreme distortions of reality. The two goals are related – the first represents one's opponent as a fundamental threat, while the second is a method of demonstrating to one's supporters that one has the strength to take on such a threatening and terrible opponent, victory over whom is cause for celebration. This distinction between a democratic culture and a fascist culture, and the correlative distinction between the aims of democratic political speech and fascist political speech, illuminates the sharp contrast between the way in which politicians in a democratic society lie or mislead their publics, and the distinctive kind of lying that occurs in fascist cultures, the subject of an important new book by the historian Frederico Finchelstein's.^{vi}

In his book, Finchelstein reminds his readers that lying is endemic to all political systems – but argues that fascist lies are a distinctive species:

Fascist lying in politics is not typical at all. This difference is not a matter of degree, even if the degree is significant. Lying is a feature of fascism in a way that is not true of those other political traditions. Lying is incidental to, say, liberalism, in a way that it is not to fascism. And, in fact, when it comes to fascist deceptions, they share few things with others forms of politics in history. They are situated beyond the more traditional forms of political duplicity. They consider their lies to be at the service of simple absolute truths, which, are, in fact, bigger lies.

Consider the distinction between the lies the Bush administration engaged in to lay the basis of the invasion of Iraq. These lies had the function of deceiving their audience. In a press briefing

with Donald Rumsfeld from February 4, 2003, in the White House, Secretary Rumsfeld replied, when asked by a reporter about an explicit denial by Saddam Hussein of any relationship with Al Qaeda, “And Abraham Lincoln was short.” When pressed to respond directly to Saddam Hussein’s denial of any relationship with Al Qaeda, Secretary Rumsfeld replied, “How does one respond to that? It’s just a continuous pattern. This is a case of the local liar coming up again and people repeating what he said and forgetting to say that he never, almost never, rarely tells the truth.” Here, Rumsfeld does not explicitly semantically express something clearly false – his intent is to deceive. In intending to deceive, one is retaining a semblance of equality of respect for one’s audience – one treats them as a fellow reasoner, whom one must persuade. All governments lie – even democratic ones.

In contrast, fascist lying involves *blatant* patterns of untruth. Fascist lying – if it is even a form of lying – is not an attempt to deceive.^{vii}

Given the utter disconnect between fascist untruths and reality, it may be tempting to assimilate fascist lying to the category that Harry Frankfurt has called *bullshit*, as Frankfurt himself has urged in the popular press.^{viii} A speaker is bullshitting, in Frankfurt’s sense, if they are not just communicating information they know to be false, but are unconstrained by any consideration of what may or may not be true. While this description is technically true, it is at best a terribly misleading of fascist lies. Philosophers use the term “bullshitter” to describe a fellow philosopher who has been refuted in a question session, and is desperately searching for a way out. This is hardly an apt description of a far-right ethnonationalist political leader.^{ix} There is a point to fascist lying, an aim that is simultaneously obscured and dangerously minimized by the unhelpful label “bullshit.”^x

Many fascist lies are not even *assertions*. Chapter 12 of Victor Klemperer's The Language of the Third Reich (Lingua Tertii Imperii, or LTI) is entitled, "punctuation". Klemperer writes:

One would naturally assume that the LTI, given its fundamentally rhetorical nature and constant appeal to the emotions, would be devoted to exclamation marks like the Sturm und Drang. In fact they are not at all conspicuous: on the contrary, the LTI appears to me only to have used this sign very sparingly. It is as if it turns everything into a command or proclamation as a matter of course and therefore has no need of a special punctuation mark to highlight the fact – where after all are the sober utterances against which the proclamation would need to stand out?^{xi}

Such fascist lies are not descriptions of the world as it is, but have a different "direction of fit" – they are commands to alter the world to accord to the statements. This is what Hannah Arendt calls *the language of prophetic scientificity*.^{xii} As she writes, "[t]otalitarianism will not be satisfied to assert, in the face of contrary facts, that unemployment does not exist; it will abolish unemployment benefits as part of its propaganda."^{xiii}

In liberal democratic politics, there is a well-known practice of plausible deniability – for example, with the use of code words such as "inner city", conveying a racist message, without asserting it. The historian Timothy Snyder has described Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin as engaging in a practice of *implausible deniability*.^{xiv} Unlike *plausible* deniability, *implausible* deniability is when someone openly and obviously lies. By so doing, according to Snyder (p. 163, Putin creates "unifying fictions at home and dilemmas in European and American newsrooms." Mocking factuality has not been something that western newsrooms have been prepared to handle, because factuality is a liberal assumption.

If we think of the function of speeches in which Putin employs the tactic of implausible deniability as being to inculcate loyalty, we will have a better sense of why the charge of lying has been so ineffectual. The informational content of such speech is an obvious lie, one that is not expected that people will believe. The communicative act is intended to be a show of strength, to show how Putin can get away with obvious lies. The main point of such a speech is not to convey information; it is rather a kind of speech whose intentions are to *create loyalty* among his supporters and to *project strength*. Open defiance of the truth, bald-faced lying, is therefore part of a speech practice, one that is intended to convey strength and power.

Fascist political lying also involves a practice of celebration – a kind of victory over one’s opponents, shared in by one’s supporters. When a politician practicing fascist politics is allowed to distort reality in these ways, without consequence, the resulting helpless rage of their opponents is experienced, by their supporters, as pleasure. This, in the United States, is called “owning the libs.” Fascist lies project strength, but they also invite supporters to join in *schadenfreude* at the opponents’ helplessness in combatting them.^{xv}

The force of reason is central to liberal democratic politics. It has no such role in fascist politics. The goal of fascist politics is to frame reality as a battle between friend and enemy – and here language has a different function. In 1946, Ernst Cassirer wrote:

If we study our modern political myths and the use that has been made of them we find in them, to our great surprise, not only a transvaluation of all our ethical values but also a transformation of human speech. The magic word takes precedence of the semantic word. If nowadays I happen to read a German book, published in these last ten years, not a political but a theoretical book, a work dealing with philosophical, historical, or

economic problems—I find to my amazement that I no longer understand the German language. New words have been coined; and even the old ones are used in a new sense; they have undergone a deep change of meaning. This change of meaning depends upon the fact that those words which formerly were used in a descriptive, logical, or semantic sense, are now used as magic words that are destined to produce certain effects and to stir up certain emotions. Our ordinary words are charged with meanings; but these new-fangled words are charged with feelings and violent passions.^{xvi}

I have argued that the centrality of the friend-enemy distinction to fascism means that discourse has a different function in fascist culture. The point of a leader's apparent assertions is to spread fear, project strength, bond the supporters to him, and to share in joy over victories. Such discourse has the aim of bonding with “feelings and violent passions” against a common enemy, rather than convincing with reason.

Fascism's distinctive antipathy to the truth is not some additional feature of the ideology. It is rather a direct consequence of the centrality, to fascism, of the friend/enemy distinction. Truth serves as a kind of neutral referee in debates. If all parties respect the truth, there is a level playing field in disputes. Fascism, in contrast, is about *power*. The enemy in fascist politics is someone who must be fought and defeated in a struggle for power – not reasoned with, as in liberal politics. Where the friend-enemy distinction is central, truth becomes just another weapon in the battle that is politics, to be employed when useful, and abandoned when not.

Liberalism assumes that what wins the day is the force of the better reason. These assumptions – that conversation is about information exchange, that argument is about expanding knowledge – have seeped outside political philosophy to affect the way philosophers, at least in the analytic

tradition, pursue epistemology and the theory of meaning. To understand the current political moment, we must, at least temporarily, set truth and evidence aside. We must understand how rhetoric sways in a way that makes truth and evidence seem secondary, and most importantly, how to reestablish truth as more than just a convenient weapon to be used in a political dispute between friend and enemy.^{xvii}

ⁱ Jason Stanley, How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them (New York, Penguin Random House, 2018).

ⁱⁱ My project here is thus tightly related to Michael Lynch's paper in this volume, "Truth as a Democratic Value." Lynch seeks to explain the role and function of "bald faced political lies." Like Lynch, I take the prevalence of a practice of bald-faced political lying to be indicative of a loss of democratic culture. But my goal is to derive the practice of bald-faced political lying from intrinsic features of fascist ideology.

ⁱⁱⁱ Tamsin Shaw, "William Barr: The Carl Schmitt of our Time", *New York Review of Books*, Jan 15, 2020.

^{iv} Jeffrey Herf, The Jewish Enemy: Nazi Propaganda during World War II and the Holocaust (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

^v This includes the United States of course, where Father Coughlin and Gerald Burton Winrod, Coughlin's fundamentalist Protestant counterpart, founder of fascist organization Defenders of the Christian Faith, were at the heart of 1930s American fascism (see Chapter 3, "The Religious Right", of Bradley Hart's Hitler's American Friends: The Third Reich's Supporters in the United States (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2018).

^{vi} Frederico Finchelstein, A Brief History of Fascist Lies (University of California Press, 2020).

^{vii} In "Bald-Faced Lying: How to Make a Move in a Language Game without Making a Move in a Conversation", *Philosophical Studies* 2016 **173.2**: 461-477, Jessica Keiser argues that *bald-faced lying* is not a species of lying; if she is correct, fascist lying is not a species of lying either, since fascist lies are a kind of bald-faced lie (see also Michael Lynch's contribution to this volume).

^{viii} "Donald Trump is BS, Says expert in BS", Harry Frankfurt, *Time Magazine*, May 12, 2016.

^{ix} See Jason Stanley, "Beyond Lying: Donald Trump's Authoritarian Rhetoric", *New York Times*, November 4, 2016.

^x These points are ably brought out at length in an important forthcoming paper by Quassim Cassam, entitled "The Bullshit Industry."

^{xi} Victor Klemperer, The Language of the Third Reich (London, Continuum, 2000), p. 67.

^{xii} Hannah Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism (Cleveland, World Publishing Company, 1958), pp. 345ff.

^{xiii} Arendt, *Origins*, p. 341.

^{xiv} Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2018), pp. 163–94.

^{xv} See Susanna Siegel’s op ed, “Schadenfreude is the wrong reaction to the President’s Covid-19”, in the Tampa Bay Times, October 3, 2020.

^{xvi} Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946), p. 283.

^{xvii} I’m immensely grateful to Melissa Schwartzberg, whose astute comments on a draft of this piece improved it immeasurably.