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How Fascism Will Beat Us || How We Will Beat Fascism

William Gillis

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One of the more annoying things about our norms of discourse is that we tend to collapse our talk of the future into singular predictions rather than arrays of different possibilities each with different probabilities. It's easier to pretend like we each have one singular future that we're betting on. We more or less commit to that single possibility and others assume we're fully committed to that future. Such simplification makes casual discussion more tractable. But it creates distorted incentives. Some try to focus on some kind of median among the possibilities, some vague central cluster. Yet this in turn suppresses the variance and the dangers on the edge. So then you get a second tendency of people who focus on the extreme possibilities, usually highlighting just one concerning outer possibility. The more the centrists cling to their median prediction, the more the extremists double down on emphasizing the things not being considered.

Most of the time the median approach "wins." But every once in a while their simplified and normalized picture runs aground on

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a variable unconsidered, an edge-case glossed over, or an assumed context exceeded.

Our political technocrats, with their studious centrism, were just astoundingly wrong about the election of a fascist over the world's most powerful country. Not just wrong about the final electoral college vote count, but wrong every step of the way. And now the entire world is rapidly reconfiguring itself at an accelerating pace. Many normal folks are clinging on, trying to update our well-worn models of reality with a few studious changes of variables. We don't have time to trace the ways the changes propagate, so we're left with quick cartoonish claims. Frantic attempts to fence in unruly anomaly in our reality and dust ourselves off. We want some kind of clear predictive map, with a touch of the familiar, some kind of bounds on the possible, even if it looks dire. Like a "Bush Administration on steroids" or a "Berlusconi with nukes".

I'm here to kick sand in your face and tell you that we don't have good justifications for such clean tales of bounded variance. Our models are broken. Or perhaps better phrased, our *norms* are broken. And we've actually no idea how deep the break goes, nor any good map of how it fractures. Although certainly many have been proposed. I would love it if there just is One Big Reason Trump Won The Election. Or even just five of them. Some isolatable problems we could chew on. I would of course love it if the Trump presidency is *merely* a bumbling deportation and torture fest filled with white supremacist marches and resistance no greater than some Democratic whining, an mildly oppositional media that normalizes him and a couple months of feckless protests involving tens of thousands in big cities. But let's hold up and examine why that (horrible) picture seems so comforting. It gives us — on some level — a nice feeling because the damage to our model of the world is *limited, confined*. It's like how people said "sure, Trump will win the Republican nomination, and isn't that horrible, but obviously he won't win the presidency."

In 1996 that great authoritarian Bill Clinton signed the Telecom "Reform" Act of 1996, passed in the Senate with only five dissenting votes, making it illegal to say "fuck" online, punishable by a \$250,000 fine. On that day many of us said "Well, fuck them." We gave up on their world. We gave up playing their games and turned away to build a new world. That world is blossoming today. It is the world the fascists are furious about, the reason they are rising as one, in a desperate effort to stomp it all out. A world infinite in gender, color and solidarity. A world unbelievably rich in art and science. And while the dinosaurs may fight and kick, may bring much of their own staid and wretched world down, we are not afraid of chaos. We are the fucking chaos.

We've got to turn into the teeming churning complex culture we've built with one another online, where we've accelerated all the processes of social evolution, and make it an acid capable of eating them alive. No retreat, no apologies, only acceleration. More science, more hyper meta and attentive culture that the local FOX news at 11 can't explain. Fuck elections anyway. Fuck democracy and fuck the very premise that 60 million idiots get to have any say over us.

And speaking of science along the way we've got to double down on carbon-negative technologies, GMO foods to kill factory farming and replace meat, asteroid mining to shutter all mines on earth, etc. Because while not every social problem has a technological solution that shouldn't make us afraid of looking for those situations where there is one. The fact is now there's no longer any political hope of dealing with global warming. The geopolitical situation too impossible, global revolution still decades away at best. So it's on us to save the world, because the fascists won't and, indeed, can't. We can whine about how unfair it is, or how much more satisfying it would be to shake everyone to awareness of their ethical obligations rather than sliding better products into their grocery baskets. But we're heroes, not whiners. We've got a world to save. Let's just get on it.

not because we're all opportunistic knife-wielding sociopaths but because of our compassion, our empathy, our drive to understand and to confront power dynamics all the way. Down to the most subtle microaggression. While it has us at each others' throats right now our love is ultimately stronger, more substantive, more agile, than the fascists' brute reaction.

So yeah, we've got to leverage our empathy for one another, the strength of real interpersonal solidarity that fascists are almost entirely barred from. We've got to leverage the connective honesty and *collaborative* competition of global markets, even just our furtive black markets, endlessly slipping past their fractal walls. And we've got to apply our ingenuity to build tools that pull the rug out from underneath them. We launched this war we today call the Internet, we fired the initial barrage of cypherpunk aspirations that shook the NSA and the world's powers to their knees. It's time to go on the offensive again, to stop monkeypatching defensively and step up our audacity again, to truly reach beyond the scope of what the NSA can see or is capable of yet considering a threat.

Sure we need to mobilize, to build mutual aid networks, get guns and tools, build activist and community infrastructure, prepare for the worst, but we've also got to leverage the things we have that they will never have. We've got to out meme them, out culture them, out empathy them, and out science them.

They can try to take our global network away from us, try to diminish the scope of the complexity we can bring to bear against them, but we still have it for a while and so it's time to leverage it like never before. The /pol/ nazis are not the internet natives here, *we are*. We own this whole fucking thing, we built the gleaming future here, in the shell of their dreary world. The simple minds of reactionaries, hostile to everything complex and rich about it, can only survive in the far flung outdated corners of the web. They are not the majority, we are. They are the flotsam, the failures incapable of keeping up, who have run home to grandma and grandpa to make america inanelly simple again.

Instead let's look at things from a different angle, one that gives his crew the benefit of the doubt when it comes to their competency:

Donald Trump is an authoritarian, we can all agree on that. He proclaims it at every opportunity. He's selected some of the most ridiculously hardline authoritarians for his administration. His vanguard are outright neonazi groups and self-proclaimed intellectual fascists, 4chan-era trolls delighting in developing a map of the world less cluttered with either ideals or constraining social norms, agile advocates of a return to more brutal dynamics of power. At the same time Trump is inheriting a state apparatus filled to the brim with relatively clear-eyed champions of state power, chafing at the limits and embarrassments foisted on them by Obama's infinitesimal conscience and an unruly expanse of activisty progressives & libertarians with the smug gall to demand any sort of constraint on the NSA or who cops can murder with impunity. These functionaries and badge-wearing thugs are lifelong Hobbesians for whom an increase in authoritarianism or totalitarianism is *always, intuitively, obviously*, preferable to the risks of freedom.

These people are thoroughly evil, sure, *but they are not complete idiots*. And unlike a liberal or even your average elected conservative, they are not fettered with delusional ideals about the nature of the state or some kind of comforting balance that can be struck between freedom and power. They are self-aware authoritarians. With a competent lay of the land. And far more unmoored from existing political norms and pressures than even Nixon was.

So ask yourself, what path would you take if you were passably smart and your explicit goal was authoritarianism?

Again, I'm not saying this is how things will *most likely* play out. In practice Trump's people will probably be constrained by the incompetence of authoritarian organizational structures and their own personalities. There will inevitably be stochastic bumps from our messy world that they respond poorly to, and some of Trump's

team might even display some occasional stray scraps of humanity, restraint or indoctrinated civics. Additionally it may well be the case that Trump has values (like building his own wealth) that come before his authoritarian aspirations. But it is nevertheless useful to plot the future from the perspective of a competent adversary with the values or goals that the Trump fascists have explicitly declared.

That future is grim.

There will be of course within the first two years mass raids, detention camps and deportations. Going places even Obama never had the capacity or the stomach for. And the whole point is that to do this requires building the state's repressive infrastructure to the point where it becomes invulnerable. In this future they keep a tight narrative leash on their base through systemic demagoguery and this inevitably involves scapegoating and building up worries about domestic enemies, what with all the protests and altercations that naturally follow. Where conflict and resistance arise they provide the justification for further repression, as well as frothing up the base and slowly callousing them with tribal fear. However where physical resistance *do not* arise the state's authoritarianism marches along *faster*, happily charging ahead to the point where resistance becomes all but impossible. In many respects the cops don't even need an explicit nod from Trump's justice department, they know they've been given the go-ahead, that they'll have his backing in whatever shit they start. The darker corners of NSA get their longstanding wishlists as every serious threat to the state's omnipotence is explicitly demolished. Signal and Riseup are shut down first. Groups like the EFF and ACLU are just swamped into irrelevance. Journalists are placed under constant siege of lawsuits, criminal charges and aggressive tax audits. Raids on some hackers in other countries happen, a few individuals holding down critical infrastructure are blacksite'd. The media bubbles isolate the outrage. Silicon valley tries to fight back and gets smacked down hard.

it trades away responsivity. In such a Rush Limbaugh model it's hard to transmit information back up from the moblized masses. So a tightly internetworked resistance cleaves through them. Similarly modern nazis love talking about a return to Dunbar-scale tribes. But such "national anarchism" sacrifices everything powerful and liberatory about globalism. Even if such mini-reichs federate they're still gonna get absolutely trounced by those communities whose social graphs are less clustered, where individuals are capable of building their own connections out of a wider array of individuals than some tribe. Granted, in our present context this benefit is not likely to be as immediately visible since most of these Small Town Nazis have already taken advantage of computational efficiencies of globalism via the initial process of building their tribes from geographically strewn likeminds. But still on any further timescale the organizational form of tribalism is laughable inefficient against any broadly networked adversary.

Part of the reason we're so weak right now is that we've been gorging ourselves on advancements thanks to the internet, and as more people share insights and experiences this has created a totally understandable race to do better, and to expect better from others. The tumblr years have seen us race to pick the best possible friends and allies, the people who most get it, who we think are most on the same page as us, most demonstrably caring about others and diligent in their investigation into the complex dynamics of oppression. Naturally in this wild rush of progress we've clustered, been exclusionary, sought out the very best in terms of politics and relations, and this has created a competitive and fractured environment. Cutthroat virtue signalling is our contemporary failure mode. And it's impossible to isolate any sort actions or behaviors in this explosion as universally negative. There are absolutely valid contexts for ostracism and the like. It's totally understandable why we're shattered into a million bristling shards, and false unity would be a thousand times worse and more dangerously empowering of authoritarianism. But we are at such a situation ultimately

leverage the benefits of love. True understanding of one another — intellectual diligence and blurred selfhood through compassion — enables incredibly high bandwidth communication and collaboration. Together we have cognitive depths they will never know. Even in the romantic context egalitarian love provides a reservoir of strength to our socially-anxious monkey brains they can only imitate with the most forced arrangements, and implicitly threat-backed lies. The pale simulcra of love they construct for themselves is both brittle and costly in its upkeep.

Meanwhile there's the organizational problems. Authoritarianism is just incredibly inefficient, both theoretically and empirically. Incapable of transmitting accurate information and getting things done. The much vaunted myth of trains running on time obscures the fact that all fascist and authoritarian governments were plagued by failure. Insofar as fascist regimes ever unleash any economic wealth it's usually by breaking through existing constraints — the Versailles treaty, for example, or the colonial land scheme in Rhodesia. These sudden bursts of wealth fade of course and the internal economic inefficiencies of the regime become pressing, usually motivating conquest to keep funding things. There are a few places in the US Trump could free up wealth or economic activity by punching through existing barriers, but these will run out. And let's not pretend that a trade war or renegotiating free trade deals will pick up much wealth for Trump. There are some places he could throw meat back to his base, but given technological realities we're really not getting net jobs back unless they're economically artificial constructs designed to put a fig leaf over a handout.

Now there are alternative authoritarian approaches to the industrial corporate state that trade their way to some specific efficiencies. The Rwanda model, for example, of decentralized radio demagoguery and then letting your listeners do the macheting of their neighbors rather than setting up some complicated Concentration Camp bureaucracy. This structure gets you benefits, but

Few tech billionaires are willing to not just lose everything but go to prison.

The anarchists, who knew we'd be first on the chopping block, get suppressed en masse. The ostensible justification — insofar as any is bothered with — being our very preparations for such suppression. Certainly we'll face raids and repression under any Trump administration, but in this timeline we get rounded up for having any ideological connection to anarchism. The cops finally get the long-delayed ecstatic joy of caving our skulls in at protests, then — as we broadly object — they get to confront our entire communities. Raids of dozens of houses per city, charges that boil down to opposing the existence of the state, having urged resistance, or speaking out against nazis (being anti-nazi will of course be labeled a hate crime). They fill the prisons rather than the camps with us, and then let the skinhead gangs on the inside whittle the herd to prevent us from organizing.

The broader libertarian, leftist, and social justice circles of the internet react with shock and horror, but unlike us haven't really built the infrastructure for serious resistance. An inability to see what can be done next reigns. Surveillance becomes all-encompassing and creates a background of terror. Laws against sedition/treason/terrorism and aggressive Big Data projects whittle the most effective dissenters from social media and make everyone speak in vague and watered down ways, uncertain of what will actually bring down the hammer.

Now obviously the majority of the US populace is "liberal" in the sense of subscribing to the civics class ideology that justifies our state, however just as obviously for most liberals their ideals are a convenient drape to hide from themselves just how spineless they really are. There are few if any real uncrossable lines for modern liberals past which point they'll take up arms or commit to serious revolt. Even those liberals known as "conservatives" who go on about the constitution are obviously more likely to be using it as a tribal applause line than some actual personal ideal. NeverTrump repub-

licans will keep nobly tweeting about the injustice of things, the racism of the repression, never once fighting back in any meaningful way. Liberalism and republicanism were once radical regicidal philosophies involving immense personal self-sacrifice and bravery, but as reigning ideology they're just a halfhearted incantation. A kind of rote narrative people tell themselves. Those truly with the ideals and commitment of ye old revolutionary liberals and republicans are few and far between. A rounding error barely adding to the numbers of leftists and libertarians inclined to revolt. And again in the face of mass raids, imprisonment, and big-data surveillance technologies, they will be utterly adrift, incapable of figuring out What Can Be Done.

Certainly some right-libertarians and tea party types will eventually realize the pot is boiling over under their own boy, but by that point they and their communities will have been worked into such a froth against their enemies, the leftists, the globalists, the muslims, etc, that they'll hesitate about actually switching over to defend them. And of course if you're deep in Red Tribe, it doesn't matter how deeply you've rationalized everything up until this point under ideals of freedom or whatever, the cost of breaking with everyone around you will be too high. At best some of these folks will just quiet down. Typical signalling like "well I don't like President Trump's camps either, but I'm also not on the side of the racist black terrorists that are out to kill all the white people, and anyway these massive camps have created lots of jobs."

At some point, either through national emergency, or international agreement between the new international order of authoritarian regimes, the internet is nationalized. Possibly whitelisted, so that it becomes far more of a content-delivery network than a communications network. Certainly most net-liberation technologies are fingerprinted and filtered through Deep Packet Inspection. Send a PGP email, it's never delivered and you get a SWAT team at your door. Worst case the conflict and the insurgent work of radicalized techies pushes things to the point where the state effec-

democracy and a great recession with permanent job loss we'd eventually see a revolt against globalism, against everything the internet and modern culture represents, against every complexifying and nuancing process on earth. But at the end of the day simple approaches are ultimately not winning approaches.

Fascism tells overly simple stories about gender, about race, about political power, about human desire, about economics. Donald Trump's much-mocked myopia where there are only "winners" and "losers" is actually an succinct statement of the psychosis of power. Fascism is infamous for its longstanding untroubled embrace of postmodern ideological incoherence, but this should not be read as a matter of intellectual complexity. Rather this miasma of ostensibly contradictory politics is precisely evidence of fascism's insular stupidity. If power is all that matters then the philosophical stuff is just a game of rhetoric. Fascism is built on an embrace of the cataclysmically stupid, the anti-intellectual turn of nihilism.

There can be no philosopher Donald Trumps, as Scott Alexander once wrote. And while the brute thug in the locker room may think this a good thing — that philosophizing is naught but unnecessary complexity and wasteful spinning, detached from the real stuff that matters in the immediate — it's the philosophers who always seem to win in the long run.

Fascism is bad at science and love. It's not geared towards radical inquiry, towards ferreting after underlying truth. Disciplined engineering it can do, but deep insights and original ingenuity it flounders at. Similarly the sociopathic frame of mind grasps people functionally, it builds very good predictive maps in most cases, but it is bad at recognizing or building off of their spontaneity and agency.

Incapable of truly recognizing or capitalizing on positive sum games, because the ideology of power collapses everything down to winners and losers. But it's not just a memetic ecosystem allergic to mutual flourishing, it's a matter of not being able to grok or

broader answers to “how do we resist” can be found by asking why fascism didn’t prosper historically, despite its clearly very strong resonance with human nature.

Oh yes sure, we’ve always lived in an authoritarian nightmare dystopia, just read some Chomsky and realize the bloodshed, imperialism, racism, and colonialism (to list but a few things) our seemingly normal world has been built upon. But let’s not kid ourselves. The space of “Much Worse Dystopias” is still very large. Hell it could get even worse than the picture I just painted. We’re not all slaves wearing explosive metal collars, without even the slightest possibility of freedom, daily brutalized and terrorized for the pleasure of a tiny viciously fighting cadre of elites. We don’t have chips in our brains that torture our every thought, milking us for cognitive tasks, and removing all autonomy. And we’re not bombed back to the stone age, bereft and starving in the poisonous rubble, stripped of knowledge and forever barred by the decay of available resources from any aspirations higher than mud.

The world could be worse than it is.

But it isn’t.

Why have outright authoritarians and all their refreshingly simple visions failed? They’ve failed because authoritarianism is rigid. It’s bad at adapting itself. It’s bad at inquiring in radical, dangerous, or memetically-risky ways. And it’s bad at processing basic information in its every motion through the world.

Modern fascists have adopted a huge array of patches to try to fix the most grievous rigidities of the old WWII era regimes — from the decentralization fetish of fascist tribalists to astroturfed swarms of internet trolls — and the alt-right loves to pretend that its the champion of forbidden discourse and verboten truths, but the crystalline core of fascism is still a matter of ossification and artificial simplicity.

These are reassuring to limited human brains facing a compounding social singularity of fluid complexity in culture and knowledge. And it is understandable that in conjunction with

tively shuts off the internet. This is plausible if economic collapse has already occurred (as a consequence of dumbshit fascist regime and mercantilist economics) so there’s not much to be lost compared to the pressing threat the internet poses to order.

Without the internet the populace is suddenly atomized and isolated. You don’t know your neighbors (since your internet friends are objectively better) so you have a hard time organizing with them. You’ve all grown used to internecine and philosophical differentiations that make collaboration in meatspace forbidding, and those resistance groups that are capable of powering through such issues only do so through their own authoritarianism.

The regime of course tries to manage ghettoized cultural channels for people, so all “the blue hairs” can make art or whatever it is they do, and grumble, but not rise up. A good hipster/lumpen base for the fascist elites to draw their sex workers, artists, and druggists from. Eventually global warming demolishes the coastal cities and their cosmopolitan populations dispersed as beggars. Problem solved.

In the rest of the world geopolitical conflicts break out, because of course they do, and history resettles into its more conventional patterns that the globalization era interrupted. There are some ideological differences between nationstate actors, but the prevailing ideologies are more like Thielian technocracy versus “national-anarchism” versus national socialist versus cutthroat crimelord oligarchy. Liberty develops further terrible associations, at least where it’s not rechanneled and re-defined into authoritarian concepts like “freedom to be your ethnic identity unperturbed by others” or “freedom from stress as well as substantive engagement with the world” or Giuliani’s “freedom means following authority” or “freedom of exit” (in a world of nothing but authoritarian regimes and steep indenturing costs to citizenship).

There are always some refuges — or refuses as it were — but such Casablanças or Switzerlands are are choked off by the international order, raided or crippled by geopolitical treaties and/or

externally funded instability/crime. In this future the authoritarians are smart, so unlike in WWII they consistently prioritize suppressing and controlling their own populaces above fighting with one another. Although of course they still engage in war. Climate change and ecological collapse lead to mass human die off in poorer countries in a way that enables the great powers to compete in the midst of their death and bloodshed without turning to outright nuclear war. (Well at least without all that many nukes used.) The instability fuels the paradigm of borders and nationalism in a stable positive feedback loop.

Again Russia is a great example of this future vision. A resigned populace that just sees fascism and cutthroat zero-sum geopolitical or economic conflict as How The World Works. Tittering disbelievingly at the absurd stupidity of those enthralled by ethical motivations or a culture of freedom. Patriarchy and racism is just The Game. And those that play it poorly play it poorly, nothing more need be said about them.

Most everything we've ever discussed, insights in gender and sexuality, ethics and science, most of the entirety of philosophy and political discourse from the enlightenment on extinguished permanently. Banned and filtered for. What scraps remain held up as punching bags.

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So how do we resist this? How do we stop it?

Granted it's not a certainty, or even the most likely path. But my point in illustrating such a dark path of compounding fascism is to emphasize that it is a distinct and concerning possibility. And often times not preparing for a possibility makes it more likely. So how do we derail this future?

Well there are obvious specifics. Build strong in-person mutual aid networks. Get millions of people adept in net security and with clear plans in their heads for what to do in worse case situations. Build better crypto/web infrastructure and finally finish PostApocalyptic tools to make bootstrapping communications

in a post-internet era more feasible and widely distribute them to millions. Force those politicians and apparatchiks supposedly in the opposition to hold an absolute line, as if it were life and death (because it is). Make them more afraid of being labeled a collaborator than being thrown in prison by the regime. Confront liberals, leftists, libertarians and conservatives and get them to personally write down what their uncrossable lines are and then hold themselves accountable. Constantly remind everyone that popular opinion isn't magic and won't mean a damn thing in the absence of actual social and technological infrastructure capable of mobilizing it. Force everyone to pay attention to what level of power, what police equipment, what organizational structures, what mobilized bodies, etc, would enable the state to not give a damn about whether the majority of the populace supports it or considers it legitimate. Simultaneously focus on radicalizing and building networks capable of surviving outright civil conflict, while also working on counter-narratives and messaging, because we sincerely won't win an actual "Let's Imprison All The Dissent" situation without at least some of the armed forces and militias having a crisis of conscience and rebelling against the Red Tribe. We need means of sorting through and structuring the raw noise of all the hundreds of audacious attacks against liberty that might come, so that incredibly important steps they take don't get lost in the noise. Because right now a blitzkrieg of unconstitutional absurdities could literally tie up every ACLU or EFF lawyer to the point where they just can't fight it all.

Additionally we've got to dig in and fortify the few places around the world where the ideals of liberty and empathy are winning. We need fallback countries, homebases, dissenting islands. And we need them to be strong enough to weather trade wars and the apocalyptic possibility of full-blown collusion between Russia, the US, and China against their own populaces and the world at large.

But we could sit here and write out prescriptions for days. It's more useful to have some general abstract guiding lights. And the