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Authoritarian populism in the US: context and continuity in a post-truth era

Introduction: history has not ended

It is not surprising that Americans at the beginning of the 21st century were complacent about social conditions and the accepted norms of political behaviour in a longstanding constitutional democracy. The economy was healthy, US national politics moved on a predictable continuum from centrist neoliberalism to further-right neoliberalism and back, divisive social and racial issues surfaced occasionally but did not loom large in the public consciousness, and the nation was mostly at peace overseas.

This was a time one could believe in the idea, described in Francis Fukuyama's 1989 essay *The End of History?* that liberal democracy was the logical political end state of the world. Fukuyama thought this end state had largely arrived, though he recognized there would be periodic events that challenge his conclusion. He argued that the 20th century began with faith in the democratic ideal and was concluding with "the total exhaustion of viable systematic alternatives to Western liberalism" (Fukuyama, 1989: 3). Evidence for this proposition included the penetration of Western culture and commercialism into nations such as China and the Soviet Union.

Two decades into the new century, the seemingly stable political setting of the turn of the 21st century is now a distant memory. Instead of the end of history, conditions in the years following publication of Fukuyama's essay have taken on the appearance of a staging period for impending turbulence and the beginning of a new sort of history. This sense of the quiet before the storm feels not unlike conditions in Europe in the years just before World War I.

Among other things, three major shocks have contributed to the dissolution of this end-of-the-century period of relative quiet in the US: the attacks of September 11, 2001, the US invasion and occupation of Iraq, and the rise of a populist movement. These events produced a nation no longer safe in its geographic isolation, a people who carry considerable responsibility for destabilizing the Middle East, and a society split into

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fractious parts by the regressive (backward-looking) politics of populism and white nationalism. History, indeed, does not seem ready to end.

The rise of a politics of populism and white nationalism in the past several years has been rapid and surprising. There were early warnings about an American form of fascism as early as the 1930s, in addition to cautionary descriptions of elite dominance written in the post-World War II period by authors such as C. Wright Mills and Herbert Marcuse. Today, politics in the US are heavily influenced by a wealthy elite using a white nationalist narrative and an authoritarian approach to governing to draw electoral support. This represents a splitting of the traditional conservative elite, in addition to an increasingly unbridgeable separation between the contemporary right and the politics of people in the moderate middle and the left.

In some policy areas, the current populist right is largely in agreement with more traditional conservatism. Examples include shrinking the social safety net for older people and low-income citizens, increasing spending on the military, weakening environmental protections, weakening worker protections, and restricting voting access and electoral efficacy for minorities and 'liberals'. However, some important traditional conservative policy positions have been abandoned in favour of an isolationism characteristic of earlier historical periods. Examples include withdrawing from international agreements on issues such as trade and weapons control, criticizing and weakening the North Atlantic Treaty Organization alliance, and significantly reducing immigration and protection for refugees.

These changes in basic policy positions are in addition to the combination of regressive concepts brought together in the current form of populism. These include a revived racism, fear and hate directed toward people of colour from other nations, homophobia, a demeaning and dismissive attitude toward women, and a willingness to use cruel, inhumane language and policies toward 'others' and political opponents. This essay explores the characteristics of populism in the US, parallels with mid-20th century fascism, and challenges of living with this new reality. It suggests that this political form is not entirely new, but is instead historically grounded in American culture.

The cultural context

Concepts such as democracy, populism, and authoritarianism are recognizable globally, but their specific meanings can be quite different from nation to nation depending on the cultural context. Americans tend to be wary of government, but that attitude has intensified dramatically in recent decades. In the middle of the 20th century three-quarters of the population trusted the federal government to do the right thing always or most of the time, but by 2019 that figure had fallen to 17% (Pew Research Center, 2019). Another cultural characteristic of US society related to current politics is the tension between workers and the elite-driven economic system, including today's concern

about growing economic inequality. In several time periods in US history, economic disagreement between people of different economic strata resulted in open rebellion or widespread organization to counter the power of elites (Goodwyn, 1978; Richards, 2002; Slaughter, 1986).

A third cultural characteristic relevant to current US politics is discrimination against certain groups of people. In the founding period of the nation, exclusion from citizenship involved native peoples, slaves, poor males, and women. To some extent this was typical of the times in many nations, hardly unique to the United States. However, throughout American history and even during periods of progressive social change, displacement of native peoples, enslavement and then discrimination against blacks, and physical exclusion and discrimination against immigrants from Asia and parts of Europe have been prominent in the national culture. These things have happened even during progressive social movements. An example is the Red Summer of violent race riots which occurred in more than 30 cities nationwide at the end of the Progressive Era, in 1919. Hundreds of black citizens were killed and the homes and businesses of many people were destroyed (Box, 2018). This was not an isolated incident; John Allen wrote that “White supremacists have murdered, lynched, tortured, terrorized, oppressed, and discriminated against black Americans from the beginning of the idea of America” (Allen, 2020). Another example of large-scale discriminatory action against non-whites was the forced internment of 120,000 people of Japanese origin, some two-thirds of whom were US citizens, during World War II.

A nation built upon the immigration (voluntary or forced) of people from a wide variety of regional backgrounds is particularly susceptible to social friction. It was not until the 1950s and 1960s that social pressure and racial unrest inspired significant changes in laws and practices to improve conditions for minority groups. Today, these changes are in danger of being weakened or reversed by political backlash from a portion of the white population, along with rights and freedoms gained during the late 20th century and early 21st century by women and the LGBT community.

In the United States, these broad cultural characteristics were punctuated by three periods of progressive social change that altered the relationship of government to society, and with it, the relationship of the mass of people to political and economic elites. These periods were the Progressive Era of the late 19th century and the first two decades of the 20th century, the New Deal of the 1930s, and the Great Society years of the 1960s, with follow-on initiatives into the 1970s. Progressive Era legislation addressed many of the issues that accompanied the shift from a rural, agricultural economy to a modern industrial state, such as working conditions, the safety of food and drugs, and the environmental protection of federal lands.

Core New Deal legislation was designed to stabilize the financial system and provide jobs for the unemployed. The larger effect was to transform the role of government in society by creating the foundation of a social safety net. Great Society initiatives brought

together a push to reduce poverty with measures addressing important social movements of the period, such as efforts to reduce discrimination on the basis of race and gender, clean up pollution of air and water, and protect wild lands and endangered species (Box, 2018). Advances made in these three periods of social change are at risk currently, as right-leaning political and economic elites work to shrink the role of government.

In the period following World War II, a number of authors analyzed characteristics of modern capitalist society. In *The Power Elite*, published in 1956, C. Wright Mills focused on the relationship of elites to the rest of the population, dividing them into three groups: political, economic, and military. For Mills, these groups did not represent a centralized or coordinated leadership, but were instead a way to describe existing power relationships and the roles of individual group members. Individuals could move back and forth between groups (Mills, 1956: 292) such as a military leader who becomes an elected official, later moving into the upper levels of a corporation.

This early period of corporate dominance in the economic life of the nation was described somewhat differently by Herbert Marcuse. From the perspective of Frankfurt School critical social theory, Marcuse viewed the modern condition as closing off public awareness of alternative ways of structuring institutions and living in society. For Marcuse, when only that which already exists seems real and possible, human life becomes “one-dimensional”. This is not necessarily the drab, utilitarian condition one envisions in postwar communist countries, but life in a consumerist society that provides “fun” and recreation to divert the mind from underlying social issues, producing a “happy consciousness” (Marcuse, 1964: 79-85). The parallels between Mills and Marcuse are notable. Both considered the foundation of modern society to be a war economy and, not unlike Marcuse’s happy consciousness, Mills viewed the typical citizen’s acceptance of the status quo as producing a “cheerful robot” (Mills, 1959: 171).

From neoliberalism to authoritarian populism

Neoliberalism, with its small-government, pro-market ideology and deregulation and privatization, became prominent in US politics and economics during the 1980s. The trends identified by Mills and Marcuse continued, as the boundaries between public and private action became less clear and governments at all levels were increasingly focused on economic efficiency as their primary purpose. In the US, a nation built upon the premise of a relatively free market, these developments did not seem particularly unusual, nor did they immediately threaten social stability. In relation to the cultural characteristics discussed above, the public was becoming increasingly skeptical about government (understandable given the premises of neoliberalism), economic inequality was growing rapidly (to be expected with neoliberalism as a guiding ideology), and issues of race and immigration continued to be of concern, though they were not usually central to public dialogue.

Despite this apparent stability, the United States proved to be susceptible to transformational political forces similar to those affecting other parts of the developed world. These forces, including economic discontent, fear of outsiders, dislike of people who are 'different', and readiness to follow authoritarian, nationalist leaders, bubbled to the surface during Donald Trump's campaign for president in 2015 and 2016. Now, they monopolize politics and media coverage, showing a quite different national face to the world than only a few short years ago. The Executive Branch pushes for dominance over Congress and the judiciary and ignores laws or policies that impede the president's wishes, the presidency is being used to benefit the president and his immediate circle, expert administrators are being pushed out of federal agencies, policies target immigrants with cruel practices, environmental and worker protections are being weakened, the president makes comments online and in person attacking anyone who disagrees with him and suggesting approval of racism and racist actions by his followers, and the United States is withdrawing from its global leadership role.

It has recently become common for authors and commentators to call this set of governing characteristics populism, but for purposes here it is important to be more specific. In the American context, this term has often been used to identify the broad economic and political movement of farmers and other workers that swept through the Midwest, the plains states, and the Southeast in the 1870s through the 1890s. Farmers formed cooperative alliances to mitigate the impacts of debt, transportation costs, and an overall economic structure that favoured economic elites. In later phases, the movement became overtly political, running candidates for office.

Though it faded away in the early 1900s, this populist movement was "a time of economically coherent democratic striving" (Goodwyn, 1978: xxi). American populism occurred during the Gilded Age, when economic elites were especially powerful, so it took considerable energy for masses of people to organize for change. Lawrence Goodwyn contrasted public acceptance of societal conditions in the late 20th century with the populists' belief in the potential for social change; it was, he wrote, "an earlier time when democratic expectations were larger than those people permit themselves to have today" (Goodwyn, 1978: xiv).

Federico Finchelstein observed that in Europe, Latin America, and North America, populism has appeared in forms characterized by politics of the left and of the right depending on the societal context. For Finchelstein, at its core, "populism is the opposite of diversity, tolerance, and plurality in politics" (Finchelstein, 2017: 173). Jeremiah Morelock offered a related description, in which populism means "defining a section of the population as truly and rightfully 'the people' and aligning with this section against a different group identified as elites" (Morelock, 2018: xiv). To distinguish the current wave of right-wing populism, Morelock added the modifier "authoritarian" – originally used in connection with Margaret Thatcher's politics of the late 1970s – meaning "to seek social homogeneity through coercion". With this modifier added, authoritarian

populism “refers to the pitting of ‘the people’ against ‘elites’ in order to have the power to drive out, wipe out, or otherwise dominate Others who are not ‘the people’” (Morelock, 2018: xiv). This term can be used to avoid confusion with the American populists of the 19th century.

Four elements of authoritarian populism in the US

In parallel with the cultural characteristics of US society discussed above, we can identify four elements of authoritarian populism: weakened government, post-truth, elite economics, and white nationalism. The purpose of authoritarian populist governance in the US is to maximize economic returns to an elite. Tactics such as centralizing executive power, stripping government of its expertise, deliberately distorting and obscuring facts, deregulating private economic activities, and distracting the population with racist and xenophobic fear may be more or less significant depending on time and place. They are currently in evidence in the US, but authoritarian populism in other nations may exhibit different characteristics or differences in emphasis on these four elements.

Weakened government

According to Bert Rockman, it has “for some decades now” been a strategy of portions of the Republican Party to emphasize political power over expertise and rule of law. Rockman finds that the recent populism represents an escalation “designed to delegitimize the government and to facilitate an authoritarian conquest of it” (Rockman, 2019: 1571). This form of populism has been transformational in the US public sector, impacting state and local governments to some extent but primarily affecting the national (federal) government.

A key feature of this situation is centralization of power in the figure of the president. The US federal government was designed by the Constitutional founders to separate power between three branches (legislative, executive, judicial) to prevent abuse and to allocate responsibilities among executive departments, allowing functionally specialized management. The Trump administration has made efforts to reformulate how this system works, so that the legislative and judicial branches, and the federal bureaucracy, hinder executive decisions as little as possible.

Using political intimidation and online attacks via Twitter, President Trump has reduced the Republican Party in Congress to an almost completely uniform and compliant support group for his ideas and policies. He has declared himself immune from prosecution for criminal wrongdoing while he is president (a claim being litigated in the courts) and refused to comply with constitutionally legitimate requests from Congress for documents and testimony by administration officials. He has attacked the decisions of federal judges if they are not in his favour and appointed a large number of

right-wing people to the federal judiciary to minimize challenges to his edicts. He has repeatedly called for opponents to be imprisoned or tried for treason (there are no legal grounds for this, so to date it has not occurred).

Rather than recognize the rule of law and established regulatory processes, thus working through the traditional channels of federal departments and appointed cabinet secretaries, Trump issues what he considers to be final decisions online via Twitter and signs executive orders that may violate existing laws or regulations. To minimize the influence of trained professionals (whom he calls, in a derogatory manner, the ‘deep state’), he has ordered vacant positions to be left unfilled, prohibited experts from presenting their research on topics such as climate change, and replaced departing political appointees with ‘acting’ leaders who are not required to be confirmed by the Senate, thus allowing him to appoint personal loyalists. These actions reduce the capacity of the federal government to provide expertise and scientific capabilities, making it easier for private interests to act without contradiction by trained people who understand the potential consequences.

This has weakened the capacity of certain parts of the federal government to function effectively. It fits a pattern of populist leadership that includes “a political theology founded by a messianic and charismatic leader of the people” and “a notion of the leader as the personification of the people” (Finchelstein, 2017: 103). A similar vision of leadership is found in studies of fascism, characterized by “the need for authority by natural chiefs (always male), culminating in a national chieftain who alone is capable of incarnating the group’s historical destiny” (Paxton, 2004: 41). Early in his presidency, when asked a question about the impact on foreign policy of unfilled senior-level positions in the Department of State, Trump responded that it was not important, since “I’m the only one that matters” (Chappell, 2017). Later, a year before the 2020 presidential election, Trump’s campaign released a video in which Trump proclaimed of his re-election: “I’m inevitable” (O’Neil, 2019). For people committed to national principles of liberal democracy, pluralism, and technically competent administration, this is a troubling situation.

Post-truth

The long-term impacts of authoritarian populism on the US government are unknown; will the constitutional system recover from these challenges, returning to some semblance of what it was before, or will it be forever changed? This is an important question, but the issue of ‘post-truth’ is at least as important for the future of democratic governance. There are many examples historically of government in the US covering up inconvenient realities, distorting facts, and using propaganda to sway public opinion. In the current authoritarian populist environment, the US national government has taken aggressive measures to destabilize factual reality itself, using lies, conspiracy theories, attacks on experts and media, and frequent reversal of positions as means to make

it difficult for the public to distinguish political assertions from truth. In this way, it has come to resemble authoritarian regimes in other nations and eras.

The nature of facts and apparent reality is an enduring matter of philosophical debate. Everyday politics and governance, though, depend on the participants acknowledging at least some degree of shared perception of the people, things, and events being addressed. They may disagree on the meaning of the factual context and what should be done, but some common agreement is needed on the characteristics of reality. As an example, given a particular rate of poverty in the population, we may expect ideologically based disagreement on whether to expand the social safety net or shrink it to encourage personal responsibility. Despite the expected variation in views about the role of government in relation to poverty, its measurement is ordinarily viewed as an empirical matter, to be addressed through research and rational debate over methods and findings. There will be differing views on research methods and findings, but the people involved will share an understanding of the nature of the realities being described. Without this shared understanding of how reality is perceived and described, it can become difficult to make collective decisions and take appropriate action in the public sphere. In the current environment, claims may be made about an issue such as poverty with no reference to factual data or, if the data prove inconvenient to a political argument, they may be labeled wrong or phony, the experts who produced the most widely accepted estimates may be called liars, incompetents, or political partisans, and the administration may seek to cut funding for the organization or agency that produced the inconvenient facts.

Prior to recent events, it would have seemed improbable that a person such as Donald Trump, who appears to have fragmentary, often incorrect knowledge of government, foreign affairs, economics, the environment, and so on, could in a few short years change how people everywhere regard reality and human communication. When such a person comes to occupy a position of power and visibility, she or he can serve as a focal point for disruptive forces and interests waiting for an opportune time to emerge. Trump's political tactics of voicing thousands of falsehoods – more than 15,000 by December 2019, according to *The Washington Post* (Kessler, Rizzo, Kelly, 2019) – and lending support to right-wing groups and conspiracy theories have rippled outward beyond the sphere of national politics.

A portion of the US population is ready to believe strange, often bizarre claims promoted by President Trump and associates, such as the idea that former President Barack Obama is a Muslim born in Kenya, that climate change is a hoax, that the Trump inauguration in January 2017 had a huge crowd when in fact it was quite small, that ingesting bleach or irradiating the interior of the lungs with ultraviolet light might be good antidotes to the novel coronavirus, and so on. This portion of the population is also susceptible to the many false stories promoted in social media during the Trump era, such as the tale that Hillary Clinton ran a child-trafficking ring from a pizza parlor in Wash-

ington, DC (Fisher, Cox, Hermann, 2016). Such stories can have concrete and disturbing consequences. The pizza store owner has suffered years of online and on-site harassment, which has affected owners of nearby businesses as well. In one instance, an armed man who believed the online claims entered the pizza store to search for child victims and discharged a weapon (fortunately, no one was injured).

False claims and stories are instrumentally useful to those who support authoritarian populism, distracting receptive people from actual events and further dividing the population into politically irreconcilable groups. As Lars Rensmann put it, “there is, consequently, a new, virtual, yet loud-mouthed social media mob denouncing facts and promoting prejudice: the democratization of resentment” (Rensmann, 2018: 43). This has become a time of ‘fake news’ and ‘alternative facts’, a ‘post-truth era.’ Lee McIntyre wrote that, “one gets the sense that post-truth is not so much a claim that truth *does not exist* as that *facts are subordinate to our political point of view*” [emphasis in original] (McIntyre, 2018: 11).

The current national government administration routinely attacks the mainstream media verbally, claiming not only that they disagree with media coverage, but that it is ‘fake.’ (The administration is less likely to attack Fox, the network that serves informally as the voice of authoritarian populism). Sometimes the attacks are in the form of threats to restrict what the media may say, for example when the President suggested a review of the broadcasting license for NBC News because he did not like their coverage of particular stories (Fung, 2018). Television news networks are not required to have licenses and the federal government has no power to review their programming content. Characteristically, Trump in this instance combines a startling statement with either a lie or simple ignorance; it is often impossible to know which. It is not unusual for him to make a strong statement on an issue one day and the next day firmly deny that is what he said.

We cannot foresee what the authoritarian populist right would actually do if they could sweep aside the legal and institutional impediments to implementing their political wishes. Given enough time and support from the public, however, the reality of a fully realized, post-truth authoritarian populist agenda might be revealed. In the meantime, abandonment of the expectation that public policy and administration should be grounded in factual reality (recognizing that facts can be manipulated and the range of opinions about what should be done can be considerable) would represent a dramatic change in the function of government.

Elite economics

Unlike the relationship between the private and public sectors in a socialist society, in authoritarian populism deregulation and privatization free the market from social constraints, government is “run like a business” (Box, 1999), the social safety net is weakened, and economic inequality increases. Leaders in such a society gain the support of

white working and middle-class people with nationalist and patriotic promises to reverse the flow of jobs to other countries, revive failing industries (such as using coal for energy production), cut public benefits to ‘undeserving’ minorities, exclude foreigners, and stimulate the economy by weakening government oversight and cutting taxes (though the tax cuts primarily benefit the economic elite). If the people believe a strong leader will bring them greater prosperity, they may be willing to accept decreasing levels of government support for the elderly, the unemployed, the disabled, and so on.

Authoritarian populist leaders know that a significant percentage of the white population will respond to political appeals based on fear of exaggerated threats from outsiders (such as immigrants from Mexico, Latin America, and Muslim nations), fear of social change that could disadvantage them (such as immigrants and people of colour taking their jobs), and prejudice based on intolerance of difference (against, for example, African Americans or single-sex couples) (Stenner, 2005; Taub, 2016). These appeals to prejudice, according to David Smith and Eric Hanley, are not only grounded in fear, but also in authoritarian aggressiveness, a tendency to “follow domineering leaders less for the pleasure of submission than for the pleasure of forcing *moral outsiders* to submit” [emphasis in original]. Such a leader is “a strong and determined authority who will ‘crush evil and take us back to our true path’” (Smith, Hanley, 2018: 195). In the US political scene, the desire to return to a time of unchallenged white dominance and exclusion of ‘others’ is captured in the slogan: “Make America Great Again”.

Authoritarian populism in this form functions economically as an intensification of neoliberalism. Though it reverses neoliberal commitments to globalism and free trade, it continues the emphasis on shrinking government and allowing wealth to flow upward to the benefit of the economic elite. In the guise of attacking intellectuals and Washington elites, by enlisting the support of workers who have felt left out and victimized by ‘the system’, authoritarian populism enhances and protects elite dominance. It helps shrink institutional buffers between the public and the interests of the economic elite that were created during the New Deal and the Great Society.

James Galbraith called this phenomenon the formation of a ‘predator state’, in which public policy and management are increasingly delegated to private-sector ‘predators’, through privatization, deregulation, and appointment of industry-friendly people and political loyalists to federal boards and senior positions in Executive Branch agencies. Thus, what had earlier seemed to be “a principled conservative’s drive to minimize the state” has instead become “a predator’s drive to divert public resources to clients and friends” (Galbraith, 2008: xiii). This situation is no longer being hidden or pursued with a degree of finesse; instead, it has emerged as standard practice during the Trump administration. It contributes to political polarization by deepening the divide between elites and the population as a whole, and between the portion of the citizenry which approves of the authoritarian populist style of governance and those who do not.

White nationalism

The elements of authoritarian populism discussed above – weakened government, post-truth, and elite economics – are each fundamentally important to how Americans conceive of their nation. Perhaps the most publicly visible and divisive of the four elements highlighted here is white nationalism. *The Washington Post* columnist, Jennifer Rubin, summarized its features in this way:

[...] key components of white supremacist/nationalist ideology: the belief that American identity is tied to race; the hysteria that the United States is being overrun by nonwhites; the notion that whites are being “replaced” (a key component of white nationalism) by nonwhites who will change the essence of America; and the belief that nonwhites (contrary to all available evidence) are more dangerous than whites (Rubin, 2019).

During the Trump candidacy and administration, a portion of the public became more inclined to voice negative attitudes about race and nationality than before and, on occasion, to take violent action. In addition to Trump’s language denigrating people of colour and those from other nations, some people have been emboldened by his efforts to extend the wall on the southern border to exclude migrants from Mexico and Latin America, detaining immigrants on the border with Mexico (including children, in caged enclosures), separating children from their families, and excluding immigrants from Muslim countries.

Repeatedly, Trump has hinted during his rallies that use of force against people who disagree with him and his followers would be acceptable or desirable. Incidents of white nationalist attacks – including those against African Americans and Jewish people – have increased in public places, such as shopping areas and places of worship, in addition to a continuing pattern of police violence against people of colour. Those perceived to be different are sometimes told to “go back where you came from”, even though they are US citizens. Such encounters can take the form of physical violence, such as one in Iowa in December 2019, in which a 42-year-old white woman drove her auto into a 12-year-old black boy who was walking home from school. Later, she used her car to hit a 14-year-old girl who was walking to a basketball game because, she said, the girl looked like a Mexican (Knowles, Brice-Saddler, 2019). (The boy was not seriously injured and the girl recovered following a stay in the hospital).

Trump has characterized people from certain nations as dangerous, as rapists, gang members, drug dealers, and terrorists, and insulted US citizens, especially those of colour, LGBT people, Muslims, the disabled, and anyone else who does not fit his ideal of white people of Northern European stock. An especially startling example was his Twitter post suggesting that four members of the US House of Representatives, all women of colour, should “go back and help fix the totally broken and crime infested places from which they came. [...] These places need your help badly, you can’t leave fast enough” (Golgowski, 2019). Later, in a Trump rally, the crowd chanted “send her back” in re-

sponse to Trump's verbal attacks on one of the Congresswomen. Only one of these four people was born outside the United States and all were US citizens, members of Congress who happened to disagree with Trump's policies. Such a display of bigotry, misogyny, and ignorance would be unpleasant enough if voiced by a person on the street; for it to come from the president of the nation is remarkable.

During a racist, fascist rally in Charlottesville, North Carolina in 2017, hundreds of white participants marched while chanting slogans such as "Jews will not replace us" and "blood and soil," a reference to a German slogan adopted by the Nazis to represent national racial purity. Their procession at night while carrying burning torches and chanting was frightening, something many Americans would not expect to see in the US in the 21st century. The next day, one of the rally members drove his auto into a group of people protesting the rally, injuring several and killing a 32-year old woman. Trump's response was to condemn bigoted action in general, but then to claim there were "very fine people on both sides" (Parker, 2019). The critical public reaction came swiftly, because many people do not think there are any "very fine" neo-fascists, but those in Trump's base who appreciate his tacit support of white supremacy were no doubt pleased (they sometimes publicly acknowledge the importance of his leadership).

There was a time, during the terms in office of the first black president of the US, Barack Obama, when media commentators wondered whether the nation had entered a 'post-racial' era in which racial discrimination was no longer a major problem in society. That discussion seems naive and outdated today. Events have produced a political divide between a vision of a nation of laws, pluralism, and tolerance, and a vision of a nation of nationalism, fear of change, and dislike of those who are different. One might have hoped the national history of divisive racial discrimination was largely a thing of the past, gradually being replaced by progressive policies and practices. Instead, it has reemerged in aggressive and disturbing forms, a vivid reminder of the enduring character of cultural attitudes. Authoritarian populists amplify this intolerance of others to show their right-wing supporters they are rejecting 'politically correct' coastal intellectual elites who favour multiculturalism and tolerance of difference. The irony behind this tactic is that the authoritarian populist leadership are in fact part of the economic elite who have throughout American history benefitted from exploitation of workers and marginalized peoples.

The nationwide protests against police brutality toward African Americans following the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis in May, 2020 highlighted the nature of white nationalism in the US. President Trump urged law enforcement to use overwhelming force to "dominate" the streets. Police and military forces were used to violently drive back peaceful protesters so Trump could have photos taken of himself standing in front of a church holding a Bible. Trump is not religious, but he understands the importance of the symbolism of white supremacy for his supporters who envision a white Christian nation in which dark-skinned people are "kept in their place" and demonstra-

tors (and, to a disturbing degree, journalists) are mercilessly beaten by police dressed in military-style battle gear. This image of Trump holding a Bible is a vivid illustration of the use of cultural fear and racial hatred as a technique for distracting public attention from the ongoing right-wing project of redistributing wealth upward.

Conclusions: living with an unsettling new reality

Terms such as populism, authoritarianism, and white nationalism are all useful in examining recent political phenomena. Even so, they seem somewhat ahistorical, as if they have appeared in the present without sufficient explanation for their recent emergence or connection to similar historical events. It is not surprising that in the US, the Trump phenomenon has stimulated interest in the history, characteristics, and current relevance of the concept of fascism.

It is widely acknowledged that the social conditions which facilitated the growth of fascism in the first half of the 20th century were quite different from the conditions today, and that current right-wing populisms do not include the horrors of mass murder and international upheaval experienced during that time. Yet, fascism and authoritarian populism share characteristics of leadership, appeal to an imagined past, a close relationship between government and business, abuse of those considered to be outside the core national group, manipulation of factual reality, and suppression of dissent.

In an effort to use careful description of fascism as a precaution against its reappearance, Roger Griffin defined it as an ideology intended to “bring about the rebirth of the ultra-nation, thereby inaugurating a new revolutionary national or civilizational order” (Griffin, 2018: 46). Finchelstein argued that a key difference between fascism and populism is the presence of institutions and processes of democracy. Thus, “in contrast to classical fascism, which uses and abuses democracy to generate dictatorship, populism does not destroy democratic representation nor fully present itself as above the rule of law”, and “the populist leader is not entirely above formal procedures and institutions” (Finchelstein, 2017: 183).

Still, current events suggest the boundaries between populism and fascism are not crisp and absolute, but can instead be a matter of degree and of change over time. In 1935, during the depths of the Great Depression in the US and the rise of Nazism in Europe, Sinclair Lewis’ book, *It Can’t Happen Here*, sold over 300,000 copies. It was a fictional portrayal of the rise of a fascist leader in America and the “it can’t happen here” theme was ironic, since the book suggested that it could. In Lewis’ dark vision, Congress is made into an advisory body, government is controlled by corporations, the leader surrounds himself with people who say “yes”, dissenters are incarcerated, and the rights of blacks and women are tightly restricted. Blacks cannot vote or serve in public office and they are prohibited from working in certain occupations; women are to stay at home, except for those working in “feminine spheres of activity” such as nursing or in beau-

ty parlors (Lewis, 1935: 63). Soon after the election of Donald Trump in 2016, the book (then more than eight decades old) came to life again, becoming a bestseller on Amazon.

In a lecture given in 1997 (notably, 19 years before Trump's election), Richard Rorty described American politics within the framework of a globalized corporate economy and increasing inequality of wealth. At that time, according to Rorty, the political party of the right supported the corporatist system and the party of the left had retreated ideologically into a "sterile vacuum called the 'center'" to avoid angering suburbanites; voters were left with a "choice between cynical lies and terrified silence" (Rorty, 1998: 86-87). Rorty suggested that in the future, anger at the system may build among workers, and,

At that point, something will crack. The non-suburban electorate will decide that the system has failed and start looking around for a strongman to vote for – someone willing to assure them that, once he is elected, the smug bureaucrats, tricky lawyers, overpaid bond salesmen, and post-modern professors will no longer be calling the shots. [...] One thing that is very likely to happen is that the gains made in the past forty years by black and brown Americans, and by homosexuals, will be wiped out. Jocular contempt for women will come back into fashion. [...] All the resentment which badly educated Americans feel about having their manners dictated to them by college graduates will find an outlet (Rorty, 1998: 90).

This is amazingly prescient – it could have been written prior to Trump's election. Rorty did not characterize this scenario as populist or fascist, but he noted the parallel to Lewis' novel from 1935 and remarked that, "once a strongman takes office, nobody can predict what will happen" (Rorty, 1998: 90). During Trump's candidacy and at the beginning of his presidency, scholars and commentators observed that he would say things that sounded authoritarian or fascist, but there was little evidence of corresponding policy outcomes or diminishment of democratic institutions. This made it reasonable to reach the conclusion that Trump was not a fascist.

Now, a few years later, the Republican Party has become a compliant extension of Trump's erratic wishes and the administration has, in effect, a state television outlet in the Fox network and widespread support in right-wing social media. Sustained attacks on factual reality, the media at large, individuals, and the independence of the national legislature, judiciary, and federal agencies show intent to suppress dissent and opposition. Institutional constraints on executive power are being challenged but show some strength in resisting authoritarian tendencies. One can only speculate about what would occur if those constraints were weakened to the point of being ineffectual, but it would not be unreasonable to expect an outcome similar to that portrayed decades ago by Lewis. Desiring goals that could be considered fascist is not the same thing as achieving them, so it can be said – as of this writing – that the Trump administration is not fascist in form. Appropriately, William Connolly has called the Trump phenomenon "aspirational fascism" (Connolly, 2017). One can think like a fascist without, for the time being, the ability to fully realize one's preferences.

It is important to take care in generalizing about population groups or the political attitudes of individuals. Political parties, racial minorities, workers, rural or suburban residents, and women are not monolithic categories consisting of people who will always think, behave, and vote predictably. Individuals often support a particular leader or party while approving of some parts of their policy preferences and performance but not others. For example, a voter might be sufficiently pleased with the economic policies of an authoritarian populist to be willing to overlook or tolerate policies she or he regards as inappropriately racist or xenophobic.

Despite this necessary caution in generalizing about political divisions, in the US, political separation grounded in issues such as immigration, race, nationalism, and so on is increasingly reflected as well in economic factors measurable in quantitative and geographic terms. Maps of the US showing Congressional districts that voted majority Republican and Democratic in 2008 and 2018 demonstrate the increasingly divided nature of the electorate. In 2008, people in coastal urban areas and some interior areas voted more Democratic than Republican, totaling 39% of the land area of the nation; people in 61% of the land area voted Republican. Ten years later, the Democratic voting areas encompass only 20% of the land area, concentrated primarily in coastal urban areas. With the exception of a few interior regions, people in the remaining 80% of the nation voted Republican (Muro, Whiton, 2019).

Reflecting the trend toward separation based on economic activity, “Republican areas of the country rely on lower-skill, lower-productivity ‘traditional’ industries like manufacturing and resource extraction”, while “Democratic, mostly urban districts contain large concentrations of the nation’s higher-skill, higher-tech professional and digital services” (Muro, Whiton, 2019). As we might expect given this situation, support for constitutional institutions, fact-based decision making, and progressive policies is increasingly pooled in these coastal urban areas. Only a few years ago, it was thought that growing demographic diversification in the US would mean that appealing primarily to white voters would soon be a losing proposition for political campaigners, at least at the national level. Because of manipulated voting districts, efforts to restrict minority access to voting, and successful appeals to white and non-urban voters, the time when demographic change might determine national political outcomes has been pushed further into the future.

Warning signs about the effects of authoritarian populism are clearly visible today. In the midst of the current flood of misinformation, distorted facts, and conspiracy theories, Timothy Snyder wrote that “post-truth is pre-fascism” (Snyder, 2017: 71). In October 2017, less than a year before he died, US Senator John McCain – war hero, former presidential candidate, long-time Republican senator, and frequent critic of the Trump administration – gave a speech expressing his concern about the direction of the nation and his hopes for the future. In that speech, McCain said: “We live in a land made of ideals, not blood and soil” (McCain, 2017).

Future elections might, or might not, reverse some of the effects of the current movement toward populist separatism; Rockman noted that “we may continue to have elections and a form of populist democracy but no longer constitutionalism or liberal democracy” (Rockman, 2019: 1571). Whether or not authoritarian populists retain national political office in the coming years, the cultural characteristics and public attitudes that produced this moment will not vanish. They may recede for a while, but they will be ready to reemerge when conditions again become favourable. Authoritarian populism extends and intensifies the close relationship in neoliberalism between the state and the corporate community, featuring weakening of government, deregulation, tax breaks for the wealthy, and use of cultural distractions to keep the supportive public from understanding what is happening to them and to the nation. The challenge is to realize when this is occurring. Commenting on Lewis’ book from 1935, Beverly Gage wrote that, “in our brave imaginations, we undoubtedly do the right thing when fascism comes to America. In reality, we might not recognize it while it’s happening” (Gage, 2017).

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Abstract: An enduring theme in US politics is tension between people on the right who favour limited government that serves individual and elite interests and people on the left who prefer active government with emphasis on a broader public interest. Recently, the political landscape has shifted from the dominant ideology of neoliberalism toward a far-right authoritarian populism with parallels to mid-20th century fascism. This shift appears in regressive societal characteristics – such as xenophobia, racism, homophobia, and misogyny – that were thought to have diminished in an increasingly progressive 21st century. An argument can be made that authoritarian populism is a continuation of longstanding patterns of elite influence, in which regressive elements serve as techniques to distract the public from the governing economic agenda. The essay examines this phenomenon and explores potential future effects on US society.

Keywords: authoritarian populism, cultural context, fascism, post-truth, elites, white nationalism

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