From Herrenvolk Democracy to Neo-Fascist Coup

What seems to be emerging in the Republican Party is a kind of modern-day fascism in which anyone who is not loyal to the leader, or the leader’s party, is treated as illegitimate.

Jason Stanley

Since losing the presidential election, Donald Trump has pinned the blame on cities with large Black populations, such as Detroit, Philadelphia, Milwaukee and Atlanta. Specifically, Trump has connected these cities with corruption, claiming for example that “Detroit and Philadelphia are two of the most corrupt political places anywhere in our country—easily.” It is widely agreed that these cities are not responsible for Trump’s electoral loss. Trump’s strategy of connecting Black political participation to corruption is just that—a strategy made more effective by the fact that it has a deeply embedded history in United States politics.

The Reconstruction era, just after the Civil War, was a brief decade or so period in which Black Americans in the South could vote. Whites in the South argued against Black political participation, on the grounds that Black elected officials indulged in rampant political corruption. In his magisterial 1935 work Black Reconstruction, W.E.B. Du Bois thoroughly debunked this view, revealing it to be nothing more than a cynical political tactic to retain white political power in the South. As Du Bois writes, “the center of the corruption charge was in fact that poor men were ruling and taxing rich men.” And in describing the strategy of using false charges of corruption to justify disenfranchising Black citizens, Du Bois states:

The south, finally, with almost complete unity, named the negro as the main cause of southern corruption. They said, and reiterated this charge, until it became history: that the cause of dishonesty during reconstruction was the fact that 4,000,000 disfranchised black laborers, after 250 years of exploitation, had been given a legal right to have some voice in their own government, in the kinds of goods they would make and the sort of work they would do, and in the distribution of the wealth which they created.

The use of charges of corruption to disenfranchise Black voters has remained in the center of American politics. Michigan politicians used charges of corruption to replace mayors and city councils of Black majority cities in Michigan by “emergency managers” charged with making all financial decisions for the municipalities which they controlled—including incurring debts that the citizens of these municipalities must pay back. Black Americans comprised 14% of Michigan’s population between 2008 and 2013. Yet 51% of Black Americans in Michigan were under an emergency manager at some point during this time. In contrast, during the same period, only 2.4% of whites in the state were under an emergency manager. Nor was the placing of so many of Michigan’s Black population under this kind of authoritarian receivership beneficial to them; it was, after all, the policy that led to the lead poisoning of thousands of children in Flint, Michigan.

Linking cities with large Black populations to corruption as a way to disenfranchise their voters is part of a lengthy American tradition of attempting to justify a Herrenvolk democracy—a system in which only members of one race or ethnic group can participate in the formation of the laws under which they are governed. But Trump’s behavior, and the behavior of the political
party that enables him, has long since escaped capture by this label. The Republican Party under Trump seems instead to be leading the country away from even a highly restricted democracy. The political formation that seems to be emerging is rather straightforwardly authoritarian in character.

Under Trump, the Republican Party seeks one party rule, in the service of a kind of cult of the leader, who promises a restoration of greatness supposedly destroyed by liberals, immigrants, minorities, and socialists. In short, what seems to be emerging in the Republican Party, out of the wreckage of our *Herrenvolk* past, is a kind of modern-day fascism. In this system, anyone who is not loyal to the leader, or the leader’s party, is treated as illegitimate—denounced as socialist, a communist, or a useful dupe of these ideologies. The party line is buoyed in the trenches by a conspiracy theory, Q-Anon, with clear anti-Semitic overtones, reminiscent both of the anti-Semitic conspiracy theory *The Protocols of the Elders of the Zion*, which postulated that Jews were a global elite that sought to destroy Christian nations with liberalism, communism, and social justice, as well as the medieval anti-Semitic charge of “blood libel.”

The word “fascism” brings with it foreign, specifically European, connotations, which belie the fact that *Trump and Trumpism are uniquely American*. But, as Sarah Churchwell, Richard Steigmann-Gall, and others have ably demonstrated, the ideology—and the word—has deep roots in the United States, particularly salient among the Black left, who have long employed it as a label for the kind of violent militarized racial police structure that subordinates Black Americans. Between World War I and World War II, Henry Ford distributed hundreds of thousands of copies of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, laying the ideological basis for the reemergence of something like QAnon today. Fascism, in its ideological component, has deep roots here. But how does the label “fascism” help us understand the predicament into which Trumpism places us today? How does it explain and predict the anti-Democratic political strategies and structures that we are now witnessing?

In his 1955 work *Discourse on Colonialism*, Aimé Césaire argues that fascism was the result of bringing to bear on domestic populations the tactics that European countries used on their colonial subjects. Using this insight, we can make sense of the Trump’s administration’s brutal war on undocumented US immigrants, using the structures developed in the recent War on Terror. But Trump himself is generally an isolationist, not a colonialist—as indeed were US fascist or fascist friendly movements from the KKK to America First. In what sense, then, does it help to see Trumpism as a fascist social and political movement, given these isolationist tendencies?

If we think of fascism in the United States as primarily directed inwards, towards a kind of internal colonization of Black and indigenous populations, we can begin to understand what we face. Some of the actors in Trump’s political sphere, most obviously Rudy Giuliani, directed their brutal tactics primarily at Black populations under their governance, masking the profoundly anti-democratic character of these politicians from whites who chose to look away. Césaire’s insight helps us see that what we are witnessing is the ordinary behavior of many politicians, but with the scope of that behavior broadened beyond Black Americans. We are, as in the case of European fascism, seeing the widening of tactics directed against essentially colonial subjects to domestic populations previously unfamiliar with them—it is just in the case of the United States, the colonial subjects
are internal to the country. As Ida B. Wells noted in her 1892 book *Southern Horrors*, “[t]hey forget that a concession of the right to lynch a man for a certain crime…concedes the right to lynch any person for any crime.”

Black Americans are used to disenfranchisement. Under such conditions, it surely was only a matter of time before unscrupulous politicians realized that whether to deploy such tactics more broadly is a difference of anti-democratic degree, not of kind. The open disdain for democratic norms we are now witnessing among Republicans are best understood as a familiar American practice of regarding certain voting populations as democratically illegitimate, now (as was inevitable) widened beyond a purely racial frame.

We are, quite obviously, nowhere near down the road of subjecting white populations to the full treatment to which our Black populations have been subjected—though we saw the glimmerings of such behavior in the Trump administration’s initially militarized response to this summer’s political protests. But this analysis enables us to see a solution to this predicament. What we see from the behavior of the national Republican Party is a broadening of a precedent set by long standing anti-democratic treatments of minority populations. The moral of our current moment is that without democracy for all, we eventually will have democracy for none.