

Branding: Fascists, 'Folks,' and Stalinoids

by [James Como](#) (August 2019)



Les Marches du Pont et la Grande Lumier Jaune, Susan Rogers, 1970

“All the world’s a stage,

And all the men and women merely players,”

–Shakespeare, *As You Like It*

. . . only now much, much worse.

–J. Como

Here are broad strokes, maybe a preface to something like *A Neo-Taxonomical Survey of Contemporary American Political Behavior*. But I couldn’t write that: too philosophical. Rather, *since discourse makes culture*, my view is rhetorical.

Politics had always been downstream from culture, but no longer. Now, owing to a belligerent and arrogant Left, culture has been politicized. That is, there is no longer an effort to persuade those with whom they disagree; instead there is a leap to legislation, regulation, and the de-legitimization of any opposition. In this Culture War they have exercised the equivalent of a nuclear option.

Now the culture is increasingly at the mercy of the State, whether it’s called Deep, or Dark, Bureaucratic, or the European Union. Moreover, to oppose this concentration of power is to be demonic: a Populist, a Nationalist, or even a White Nationalist (definitions not welcome, of course).

So picture this. A long, vertical hinge with two wide, long panels swinging on it. That hinge is Fascism—not metaphorical fascism, not the “Trump is a fascist” fascism—but the real thing. One panel is ‘ordinary’, the other is openly *malignant*, both (as I will describe them) are toxically ‘Stalinoid’. The first swings acquiescently to the movement of the second, which though smaller is weightier, more dense and therefore more kinetically forceful. Together they are unmaking one culture and making another.

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Wait. Did I say ‘Fascism’, “the real thing”? Here is Benito Mussolini in the 1920s: “The fascist conception of the State is all embracing; outside of it *no human or spiritual [belief] can exist, much less have value.*” It forms, said the Duce in 1932, a “spiritual and moral empire.” That is the conception that drew Lenin to Mussolini, a fellow radical Leftist (as Paul Johnson has taught in his magisterial *Modern Times*), and it is barely different from Stalin’s conception of the state as expressed in the 1936 Soviet constitution (barely differing from Bernie Sanders’ platform).

In such a milieu, what space is there for the *individual*? Who among the Left follows the advice of Malcolm X, from one of his final and finest speeches, to “look for yourself, think for yourself, then make up yur own mind”? This, I know, sounds counter-intuitive, given the mainstreaming of what once were counter-cultural people, until one remembers that those people are now virtually collectivized as *communities*, instruments

for punishing anyone who deviates, even if otherwise a 'member': ask any gay person who has no patience with the LGBTQ movement, or any member of the 'acting community' (e.g. Jon Voight) who supports the president. Need I mention Black Conservatives?

In fact, this Other—this *deviant*—ordinarily lionized by the Left, is actually hated by it, a hatred, by the way, that is then projected onto *them*. (Antifa terrorists beat and humiliate a conservative reporter as they cry “no more hate,” as though *he* were the one doing the beating.)

The 'Ordinary': Pseudo-Folk

A grumbling irrationality parading as thoughtfulness rules this frenetic, but actually very lazy, land. So this half of my meditation is about our culture of cheap solipsism, or, rather, its *pseudo-folk*. Forty years ago Christopher Lasch diagnosed our Culture of Narcissism: “Every age develops its own peculiar forms of pathology, which express in exaggerated form its underlying character . . . Narcissism appears realistically to represent the best way of coping with the tensions and anxieties of modern life . . . The ideology of personal growth, superficially optimistic, radiates a *profound despair and resignation. It is the faith of those without faith.* [my emph.]”

Lasch called that decade 'Me' (only the beginning . . .), which was preceded by The Sixties, when post-adolescents took over the land and sowed the seeds of Me and real adolescents

then plucked the ripened fruit. These have now evolved from Wanton Woodstockeans to the Benign Bourgeoisie—and now they have their own progeny. Thus do we inhabit what may be the most culturally noxious decade in the history of the Republic (“Fuck Trump” shouts an actor from the nationally televised stage of an awards ceremony, and is defended by academics and *artistes*), with so, so many of us turned into performance divas: pseudo-people diving into the pool of inauthenticity and emerging all made up and with a part to play (tattoos tattoos everywhere, with any drop of ink).

The culture has devolved into a way of being, so what was once entertainment, or, among non-professionals, simple, occasional posturing, now walks the land in broad daylight, usually including a parade. This has spawned the prevalence of a great, self-indulgent and fraudulent culture of pseudo-claims, -beliefs, -behaviors, and -people.

The consequence of this fraudulence is entropy: indeed, things fall apart and the centers—of morality, of sexual identity, of modes of discourse and the social roles that gave rise to them, of wisdom and the permanent *and* the impermanent things that should hold us together, of joyful arts, of family—these centers are not holding. (Of course, a shifting of the socio-political calculus should be continual, even if not easy: just ask the president, who is trying to crack the calculus that has been ossifying for three generations. But *that* is not culture, a deeper, more thickly woven fabric.)

Worse, most people who regard themselves as informed, as *with it*, progressive, and *woke*, have checked their brains at the door: they see but do not recognize, or if they recognize they quickly turn away, or if they do not turn away they accede, as

though they have chosen, even though no one, until recently, would have regarded their accession as a genuine choice, as opposed to a trendy herd-like, tourette-ish, intimidated drift. How could it *not* have been? Their brains are back at the coat rack.

Soon enough the reader will discern that I live in a big coastal city; in fact I'm quarantined on the Upper East Side of Manhattan and so I do not know what people in Dubuque think or feel, not really. I do know that Joe Biden, for example, always good for a lamentable laugh, thinks that *they* think that Chinese rulers are just 'folks' (one of Obama's favorite words, by the way), as in "those folks don't want to hurt anybody," or words to that effect (though by now he may have flipped, then flopped, then flipped again).

Just folks; just plain folks. Like the rest of us folks. Just funnel your folksiness through friendly Joe and we'll all get along. (As the emcee of this charade he may even give you neck massage.) As one good and generous liberal friend recently told me, "we're all the same, and basically good." (After attending a very exclusive Manhattan school she became a social worker, then married *very* well.) But, of course, that is false (though here a discussion of Original Sin would be a trip down a tributary), like all the other regnant falsehoods that populate the culture.

I do not mean those that drip from the merely mendacious and cynical, the routinely dishonest opportunists who are always with us. (Back in the day, my favorite was the processed and pompadoured Reverend Ike, who would ask his flock, "Why wait for pie in the sky when you die when you can have it here with a cherry on top?" Now his offspring are running for the

Democrat nomination.)

Rather, I mean—here a sampling—those who:

1. comfort themselves with *unease*, a belief in looming political, climatological, and economic Armageddon—who are, in fact, *very* safe, as here they have always been, but whose unease shows sensitivity and ‘concern’, except with regard to cultural devolvement (especially Daniel Moynihan’s “defining deviancy down”). *Everything* is the apocalypse. What fun to be in the foxhole together.
2. are *victims* of all sorts of atrocities, like women who cannot easily get late-term abortions around the corner from where they live;
3. are celebrated as *heroes* because, for example, they pornographically criticize the President and the First Lady (alternatively called “speaking truth to power”);
4. are *survivors*, say, of an unfortunate election;
5. are not religious but are ‘*spiritual*’ because they light incense or somehow ostentatiously abuse established religious practice (having their “own conception of God”—see also ‘hero’);
6. are sexually *liberated*, both in practice and in “choosing” a sexual identity—and in confusing coitus with intimacy, though denying that they do so;
7. contrive to *feel*—anger, insult, fear, and especially compassion—and who credit those contrivances as conveyers of moral truth (because the feeling is *theirs* and so cannot be epistemologically invalid), thus demanding assent from the rest of us (a conviction that goes back at least to Wordsworth’s Preface to the second edition [1800] of the *Lyrical Ballads*: “the feeling . . . developed gives importance to the action . . . and not the action . . . to the feeling”);

8. believe identity is merely demographic, and who
9. believe that verbal and oral intensity, because evidence of conviction, is not only justified by necessary.

Now, lest anyone leap to the straw man that I mean all of these are always and everywhere falsely manifested, I say the opposite: sometimes these claims are genuine, and they are almost always sincerely (even if merely subjectively) proffered. But the verbal inflation always cheapens the currency of hard thought and useful discourse and invites the exhibitionists (politician, pundit, celebrity, athlete . . .) to a game of call-and-raise.

What I do claim, however, is that these *topoi* have become rhetorical fixtures. As *memes* they inflect our discourse, ramping through our cultural veins like so many pollutants, *and it is that discourse that makes our culture*. Often contradictory, they are held nonetheless, and happily. After all, we are told that common sense, let alone logic, is hegemonic, paternal, and post-colonial (another *meme*: number ten?) and that facts, these days, are in the eye of the beholder (a variation of C. S. Lewis's "Poison of Subjectivism").

Of course we do not inhabit one but many cultures, and often they co-exist peacefully, even pleurably. But from time-to-time one or another claims counter-cultural status (and therefore high moral standing) *even as it calls the shots*. Therein lies the entropy. What assured some coherence as recently as twenty-five years ago has been overturned by what then was the counter-culture: farewell coherence, hello a buffet of counter-cultures. And with that comes something new: *cultural compulsion*. As I've mentioned, there is little

attempt at persuasion, and politics (remember, it *used to be* downstream) has become the whole flow.

Certainly coherence has been tyrannical, as was the case with racial status, but language, though malleable, was meaningful, as opposed, for example, to mixed sex pronouns chosen by each of us as we please (there's that solipsism). My response to this charge of tyranny is to ask (for example): If we can redefine marriage why not permit interspecies, or sibling, matrimony? (Which has actually been suggested: "imagine the insurance benefits.") If that sounds unserious, tell me, please: how so? If an unborn human is not a living *homo sapiens*, how not? Does the Left ever bother to *refute* the pro-life case? I seek a *principled*, not a merely trendy (no matter its might) *preferential* (and therefore subjective) case. I want argument, not imposition, which comes in many forms.

What would Lasch say about such brands as Adore Me (women's products), or motivational senselessness such as "you can be anything you want to be," or pride in anything, e.g. same-sex attraction, having nothing to do with any actual *achievement* whatsoever, or trophies for every little incompetent who kicks a ball? These typify the culture of fakery, with costuming to match, along with language ('creative', 'original', 'artist', 'community', and the tiresome 'special'). Can the culture be more meretricious?

This—a cheap, oh-so-sincere fakery, self-satisfied and smug (for which the slogan is "keep it real")—is at the core of our entropy. Too many of us are collectivized, secularized, de-natured, de-racinated, and profoundly inauthentic, a population of selves the exact opposite of what 'folk' (as in folk wisdom, or folk tales) used to mean.

What, with this, its twin . . . In "Membership" C. S. Lewis wrote, "I have been trying to expel that . . . the pestilent notion of personality . . . that each of us starts with a treasure called 'Personality' locked up inside him, and that to expand and express this, to guard it from interference, to be 'original', is the main end of life."

Alcibiades, Cleopatra, Byron—such extravagant and self-indulgent psyches are always with us. But these days they walk among us as fellow-travelers, no matter how narcotized they may be, of the second group: not *real* folk, not authentic, that is, *independent*, individuals.

Malignant: The Neo-Stalinists

Thus our current civil war is actually cultural, then political, and therefore inevitably, lapel-grabbingly, personal, and rhetorical. On the Left all is hortatory, imperative, condemnatory, dismissive, apocalyptic; never recitative, always aria: only *Sturm und Drang*. I used to think 'progressives' knew better but spoke their nonsense opportunistically, cynically: after all, it might just work, twitch some minds. But then I saw that the Beast of Narcissism, with its trailing familiar of Self-Righteousness, would be fed. The madding crowd could label, demonize, and ultimately dismiss the opposition—and it feels so good. (There are exceptions: every now and then Amanpour seems ready to reason, as she was with Claire Lehmann of *Quillette*, the online journal of that beaten reporter.) Withal they are Eric Hoffer's True Believers—cynical, still opportunistic, but now

simply childish, intellectually shallow—but authentically so, *collectively*.

Their bumper-sticker thinking walks the earth as political philosophy, as do figures of speech and contrived theories, -isms, -osophies, -ogonies, and 'studies'. Manners are repressive, rudeness celebrated, an inventory of fallacies (e.g. the whole for the part, the part for the whole, a failure to define, causal confusion, red herrings, strawmen, smokescreens, shifting of ground)—these proliferate, with whole new vocabularies ('woke', 'intersectionality', 'embyonic pulsing') invented . . .

Does all this sound familiar? Every revolution has done the same; our case is simply the current flavor (though maybe soon we, too, we will be renaming months). New congresswomen who belong in the sandbox, old senators who should be medicated, an excitable audience populating our neo-Coliseum (print, electronic, and social media), mobs who enable with their cheers, amplifications and self-reinforcing mutual satisfactions: together they toll the knells of death—of statues, livelihoods, ideas and discourse, not to mention real debate, reason and courtesy.

Policies of national impoverishment, compromised national sovereignty, diluted defense, and guilt-inducing accusations (Rubio is right: Obama *did* mean it, *all* of it) accompany Neo-Stalinist devices of thought- and speech-repression. (My gasbag governor screams that anyone who is pro-life "has no place in New York.") Abstractions express utopian goals, not principles. What goals? Let us guess: our big-city mayor honeymooned in Havana, a senator in Moscow; a congresswoman defends the ravages of the Maduro regime.

They speak what they *feel*, and therein lies the fault. A simulacrum of thinking comes later, to justify the feeling, and the feeling comes from—well, a *Weltanschauung* arising from attitudes fundamentally collective, fungible (one cause into another, one culture into another, one national identity into another), improvisational, and hungry for power. A bagful of self-deceiving fetishes (diversity, inclusion, equality) and the rule of chromosomes (that is, those demographic descriptors) dominate.

On the other hand, deliberative rhetoric—the type that requires explanation, at which Trump, Obama, and W are and were so inept, Reagan so adept—is too much trouble: why explain dogma? In short, we have—and take seriously—childish, largely ignorant minds pontificating with religious zeal.

Are we in the greatest generation gap in our history? (I'm told that many senior woman look down on the #MeToos.) Self-styled alphas of our brave new world unknowingly follow a dead white male, Pico della Mirandola, whose "Oration on the Dignity of Humanity" (the so-called "manifesto of the Renaissance") teaches that one's station is not fixed but is determined by what one chooses to enact: all the world's a stage indeed.

And that *sounds* like freedom, in fact, like America, but the Stalinoids want nothing to do with freedom. They are C. S. Lewis's Innovators, who invent new values (or, more specifically, 'rights'), on their way to becoming his Conditioners, who see through all value, seeking nothing other than power; they will level us (always down), tribalize, and

finally de-humanize us—while they remain free. They weave their own web of meaning, an internal framework of pseudo-understanding. Moreover they are cyclothymic, a mood disorder. In it, they swing between periods of mild depression and hypomania. When howling at the moon (literally) becomes tiresome, they jubilate over a Green New Deal.

At work here, I think, may be what Jakob von Uexkull called *Umwelt*: how living beings [perceive](#) their [environment](#). Organisms experience *Umwelten*, a 'self-in-world' of subjective reference frames (*surrounding-world, phenomenal world*). These are distinctive from [Umgebung](#), the living being's surroundings as seen by an observer. *Umwelt* is a *perceptual world* in which one exists and acts. A *new* renaissance: Pico lives.

So we have, inevitably, a clash of *Umwelten*, with so many weaklings—*benignities* (why not?)—caught in mid-swing on that hinge of fascism, eventually submitting to Romper Room wails of accusation. (Joe Biden, chump that he has always been, apologizes for calling VP Pence “a decent guy.”) Well then, try saying islamophobia is not rampant, white privilege is not preponderant, socialism is imbecilic, the right side won the Spanish Civil War, anti-Semitism is largely of the Left, sex is biological, climate change is not apocalyptic, unfettered immigration is a menace, same-sex unions are fine but not 'marriage', the unborn are people too, truth exists, history matters, anger does not trump reason, 'social justice' is mostly a damaging sham, sin is real, humans are not perfectible, there can be no earthly utopia—and do not apologize.

Sound extreme? It is the way of extremes, especially sneaky

ones, to beget loud, angry, *woke* extremes from the opposite direction. But my litany is *not* extreme and never has been—except to Stalinoid extremists.

Consider, for example, the deep divide between Globalization[1] (from open borders, to no borders, to the elimination of the nation-state, “melted away,” as Jurgen Habermas happily has put it) and Populism, though the battle has been largely one-sided. Globalists—old-school ‘one-worlders’—gradually encroached, until populists, so-called, whose allegiance is to a nation-state and a particular culture—awoke to find themselves demonized.

In the EU people simply may not oppose an *acquis*, something permanent, unassailable, whether a program, a policy, or even a social norm. Of course, few people voted for *this* Union (a Maastricht treaty so convoluted that its authors couldn’t explain it), one of the greatest long cons in history: the essence of Stalinism. And, of course, questioning this fetish invites a rhetoric that makes Joe McCarthy’s look like a Gregorian chant.

Not long ago a friend, an extraordinary man, formerly a student whose mother was an original Black Panther, gave me a flash drive loaded with broadcasts from Pacifica Network, the ultra-liberal radio station. In some instances these archives went back fifty years, to James Baldwin, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X. The programs are not balanced—the Left advocacy was always front-and-center—but they are rational. Karen Armstrong on religion and violence, Reza Aslan on the politics of Jesus of Nazareth, a celebration of Cesar Chavez, and several from “Out of the Vault,” most notably featuring Ruby Dee[2] and Ossie Davis as narrators.

These make no pretence to debate but attempt actual explanations; they do not drive me nuts. Their positions and dispositions are *not* very different from what we hear these days from the Neo-Stalinists, but none seemed to me to be totalitarian, to demonize the opposition, or, simply put, to be juvenile.

Now we have that mayor, that senator, that congressperson, that governor, fellow-travelers (at best) not caring to call out their heroes for the firing squads, squalor, gulags, or any of the other uncountable depredations. Why bother? Whether by mockery, ostracism, expulsion, imprisonment, beatings by Antifa, or merely by exile to the black hole of neglect, opposition is marginalized, or silenced. The Soviet empire may not exist, but its ideology (*mutatis mutandi*) does: total, despotic, fraudulent, treacherous. It is spreading as a state of mind.

An irony is that we have so much talk about talk. Here, too, it seems the Stalinoids can *only* project: its own abuses (e.g. demagoguery) onto the opposition, along with its own hatred. 'White privilege' is as racist a phrase that you could have; no one calls it out. Senators Warren and Sanders are the biggest demagogic blowhards around, yet when a Tony Award winner (could you count the center-right people at that show?) refers to 'demagoguery' it is assumed he means the president, and lets the splenetic press off the hook; Lawrence Tribe describes a military parade on Independence Day as a prelude to an American Tiananmen Square massacre—nary a word.

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- [The Justice on Trial](#)
- [The Tongue is Also a Fire: Essays on Conversation, Rhetoric and the Transmission of Culture . . . and on C. S. Lewis](#) (New English Review Press, 2015). His new book, from the Oxford University Press, is *C.S. Lewis: A Very Short Introduction*.

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