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Believe in truth.

To abandon facts is to abandon freedom. If nothing is true, then no one can criticize power, because there is no basis upon which to do so. If nothing is true, then all is spectacle. The biggest wallet pays for the most blinding lights.

You submit to tyranny when you renounce the difference between what you want to hear and what is actually the case. This renunciation of reality can feel natural and pleasant, but the result is your demise as an individual—and thus the collapse of any political system that depends upon individualism. As observers of totalitarianism such as Victor Klemperer noticed, truth dies in four modes, all of which we have just witnessed.

The first mode is the open hostility to verifiable reality, which takes the form of presenting inventions and lies as if they were facts. The president does this at a high rate and at a fast pace. One attempt during the 2016 campaign to track his utterances found that 78 percent of his factual claims were false. This proportion is so high that it makes the correct assertions seem like unintended oversights on the path toward total fiction. Demeaning the world as it is begins the creation of a fictional counterworld.

The second mode is shamanistic incantation. As Klemperer noted, the fascist style depends upon “endless repetition,” designed to make the fictional plausible and the criminal desirable. The systematic use of nicknames such as “Lyin’ Ted” and “Crooked Hillary” displaced certain character traits that might more appropriately have been affixed to the president himself. Yet through blunt repetition over Twitter, our president managed the transformation of individuals into stereotypes that people then spoke aloud. At rallies, the repeated chants of “Build that wall” and “Lock her up” did not describe anything that the president had specific plans to do, but their very grandiosity established a connection between him and his audience.

The next mode is magical thinking, or the open embrace of contradiction. The president’s campaign involved the promises of cutting taxes for everyone, eliminating the national debt, and increasing spending on both social policy and national defense. These promises mutually contradict. It is as if a farmer said he were taking an egg from the henhouse, boiling it whole and serving it to his wife, and also poaching it and serving it to his children, and then returning it to the hen unbroken, and then watching as the chick hatches.

Accepting untruth of this radical kind requires a blatant abandonment of reason. Klemperer’s descriptions of losing friends in Germany in 1933 over the issue of magical thinking ring eerily true today. One of his former students implored him to “abandon yourself to your feelings, and you must always focus on

the *Führer's* greatness, rather than on the discomfort you are feeling at present." Twelve years later, after all the atrocities, and at the end of a war that Germany had clearly lost, an amputated soldier told Klemperer that Hitler "has never lied yet. I believe in Hitler."

The final mode is misplaced faith. It involves the sort of self-deifying claims the president made when he said that "I alone can solve it" or "I am your voice." When faith descends from heaven to earth in this way, no room remains for the small truths of our individual discernment and experience. What terrified Klemperer was the way that this transition seemed permanent. Once truth had become oracular rather than factual, evidence was irrelevant. At the end of the war a worker told Klemperer that "understanding is useless, you have to have faith. I believe in the *Führer*."

Eugène Ionesco, the great Romanian playwright, watched one friend after another slip away into the language of fascism in the 1930s. The experience became the basis for his 1959 absurdist play, *Rhinoceros*, in which those who fall prey to propaganda are transformed into giant horned beasts. Of his own personal experiences Ionesco wrote:

University professors, students, intellectuals were turning Nazi, becoming Iron Guards, one after the other. At the beginning, certainly they were not Nazis. About fifteen of us would get together to talk and to try to find arguments opposing theirs. It was not easy....From time to time, one of our friends said: "I don't agree with them, to be sure, but on certain points, nevertheless, I must admit, for example, the Jews..." etc. And this was a symptom. Three weeks later, this person would become a Nazi. He was caught in the mechanism, he accepted everything, he became a rhinoceros. Towards the end, only three or four of us were still resisting.

Ionesco's aim was to help us see just how bizarre propaganda actually is, but how normal it seems to those who yield to it. By using the absurd image of the rhinoceros, Ionesco was trying to shock people into noticing the strangeness of what was actually happening.

The rhinoceri are roaming through our neurological savannahs. We now find ourselves very much concerned with something we call "post-truth," and we tend to think that its scorn of everyday facts and its construction of alternative realities

is something new or postmodern. Yet there is little here that George Orwell did not capture seven decades ago in his notion of “doublethink.” In its philosophy, post-truth restores precisely the fascist attitude to truth—and that is why nothing in our own world would startle Klemperer or Ionesco.

Fascists despised the small truths of daily existence, loved slogans that resonated like a new religion, and preferred creative myths to history or journalism. They used new media, which at the time was radio, to create a drumbeat of propaganda that aroused feelings before people had time to ascertain facts. And now, as then, many people confused faith in a hugely flawed leader with the truth about the world we all share.

Post-truth is pre-fascism.

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