

(Two clips from Gary Dorrien's review of Timothy Snyder's *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* in *The Christian Century* magazine 6/21/17, which raise some critical questions)

On Tyranny is strangely silent about racism, hardly a minor topic then or now. Snyder ignores how even the Nazis were selective about when and where they vented their race hatred, a concession to polite society that swelled Hitler's respectability in church circles on his way to power. Snyder is similarly silent about Trump's odious leadership of the birther campaign, which was too blatantly racist to be called a dog whistle, and his ludicrous claim that black Americans had nothing to lose and thus nothing to lose by supporting him. Whites must stop assuming that their political liberalism exempts them from interrogating why race mattered and matters. White racism has been the rocket fuel—though not the chief cause—of every form of authoritarian nationalism to gain power in the past century, and it still is.

But Snyder's persistently small-bore lessons reflect the Internet purview he otherwise disdains. He underplays the necessity of building a resistance movement that asks rude questions, challenges normal politics, does not delay out of politeness or caution, and creates new organizations demanding equality and democratic accountability.

On Tyranny says nothing about the Bernie Sanders presidential campaign, which drew enormous crowds, and almost nothing about economic injustice. Sanders spoke directly to voters in both parties left behind by corporate capitalism and the power of Wall Street. Sanders understood that exhortations about thinking your own thoughts, making eye contact, and cultivating a private life will not hold off the onslaught of authoritarian nationalism. He understood the economic pain ravaging America's working-class communities and the imperative of speaking to it. He was a flawed candidate. He had no music in him, he radiated Old Left economism, and he never broke through to most African Americans. But the Sanders campaign represented the heart of a resistance that will thwart America's drift into authoritarian nationalism—if it is thwarted—and for reasons not mentioned in Snyder's 20 lessons: it is a democratic movement that grasps why authoritarian nationalism is surging and understands the anger of Trump voters against a system that does not work for the majority.

The lessons of the 1930s are indeed pertinent for our moment. But Snyder barely mentions that the ravages of capitalist inequality and breakdown were the chief drivers of the political catastrophes of the 1930s. The social democratic tradition and the trade union movement that inform Sanders are unknown to the readers Snyder envisions, so he provides pithy lessons about breaking free of the consumer herd. Snyder never mentions that the United States had ample experience with fascist movements before and during the crash of European democracies. Franklin Roosevelt had to fight off fascist currents in his own party to make the federal government work for hurting working-class and middle-class people. The New Deal was so successful that a succeeding generation regarded Social Security as an American birthright. The Democratic Party at the time routinely advocated universal government health coverage.

On Tyranny takes no position on what it would take to sway a significant segment of the angry, alienated, hurting, white working class away from authoritarian nationalist politics. Presumably, and quite plausibly, this question is not helpful in the immediate crisis. The imperative of the moment is to defend democratic institutions.

But no democracy can perpetually survive gross disparities in economic and social conditions. The United States is hurtling faster toward authoritarian nationalism than its European counterparts because it has never established more than a minimum of a social democracy. In every nation with a social democratic tradition, everyone's health care is covered, the power of private money in the political system is curtailed, and nearly everyone recognizes that there is such a thing as an intolerable level of economic inequality. In the United States, millions have no health coverage, private money dominates the political system, and nothing is done to stem staggering inequalities of income and wealth.

White working-class voters have come to hate the federal government because they believe it does nothing to help them. Authoritarian nationalism at least speaks to their distress. What's needed is a substantive, democratic alternative.