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OPINION | GLOBAL VIEW

The Return of the 1930s

Donald Trump's demagoguery may be a foretaste of what's to come.



By
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Italian dictator Benito Mussolini saluting during a public address in 1938. PHOTO: KEYSTONE/GETTY IMAGES

In
temperame
nt, he was
“bombastic
,
inconsisten
t, shallow
and
vaingloriou
s.” On
political
questions,
“he made
up his own

reality as he went along.” Physically, the qualities that stood out were “the scowling forehead, the rolling eyes, the pouting mouth.” His “compulsive exhibitionism was part of his cult of machismo.” He spoke “in short, strident sentences.” Journalists mocked his “absurd attitudinizing.”

Remind you of someone?

The description of Benito Mussolini comes from English historian Piers Brendon's definitive history of the 1930s, “The Dark Valley.” So does this mean that Donald Trump is the second coming of Il Duce, or that yesteryear's Fascists are today's Trumpkins? Not exactly. But that doesn't mean we should be indifferent to the parallels with the last dark age of Western politics.

Among the parallels: The growing belief that democracy is rigged. That charisma matters more than ideas. That strength trumps principles. That coarseness is refreshing, authentic.

Also, that immigrants are plundering the economy. That the world's agonies are someone else's problem. That free trade is a game of winners and losers—in which we are the invariable losers. That the rest of the world plays us for suckers. That our current leaders are not who they say they are, or where they say they are from. That they are conspiring against us.

These are perennial attitudes in any democracy, but usually marginal ones. They gained strength in the 1920s and '30s because the old liberal order had been shattered—first at Gallipoli, Verdun and Caporetto; then with the Bolshevik coup in Russia, hyperinflation in Germany, Black Tuesday in the United States. “What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow/Out of this stony rubbish?” wondered T.S. Eliot in “The Waste Land,” in 1922. Mussolini's Blackshirts marched on Rome the same year.

Modern Americans have experienced nothing like those shocks, which is one important difference with the 1930s. The French army lost more men on an average day on the Western Front than the U.S. lost in our worst year in Iraq. At the height of the Great Depression, real per capita GDP fell by nearly 30% from its previous peak. At the depth of the 2008-09 recession, it fell by about 6%, and soon recovered.

Then again, the pain you're in is the pain you tell yourself you're in. Or, at least, the pain you're told you're in, usually by political doctors who specialize in hyping the misery of others.

So we're being “invaded” by Mexicans—except that for years more Mexicans have been returning home than coming here. So China is destroying our manufacturing—except industrial employment has surged in recent years, especially in the Rust Belt. So the great mass of Americans are now unprotected from the vagaries of the global economy—save for Medicare, ObamaCare, the earned-income tax credit, public-employee pensions and every other entitlement that Mr. Trump promises to protect.

All this generates the hysteria, the penchant for histrionic rhetoric, the promise of drastic measures, the disdain for civility, the combination of victimhood and bullying on which the Trump candidacy feeds, and which it fuels. Reading through the avalanche of pro-Trump emails that arrive in my inbox (by now numbering in the thousands), what's notable are the belittling put-downs (“you're an \$@%&, Bret-boy”), the self-importance (“I make more money than you”) and the sense of injured pride (“how dare you call me a vulgarian?”). This is precisely the M.O. of their candidate.

“In breaking the taboos of civility and civilization, a Trump speech and rally resembles the rallies of fascist leaders who pantomimed the wishes of their followers and let them fill in the

text,” writes the University of Maryland’s Jeffrey Herf in a brilliant essay in the *American Interest*. “Trump says what they want to say but are afraid to express. In cheering this leader, his supporters feel free to say what they really believe about Mexicans, Muslims, and women.”

This is not the politics of economic anxiety or dislocation. It’s a politics of personal exhibitionism, the right-wing equivalent of refusing to be “body-shamed.” Thanks to Donald, the Trumpkins at last have a license to be as ugly as they want to be.

Mr. Trump’s bid for the presidency takes place during a period of mediocre but nonetheless unmistakable economic and employment growth in the U.S. But as a wise friend of mine noted the other day, what happens when the next bubble bursts and the next recession arrives? A reasonable person can argue that Donald Trump is more Silvio Berlusconi —Italy’s clownish billionaire and former prime minister—than he is a new Mussolini. Maybe. Or maybe Mr. Trump’s style of politics is just a foretaste of what’s to come, especially if an American downturn became a global depression.

In the work of preserving civilization, nine-tenths of the job is to understand the past and stress its most obvious lessons. Now would be a good time to re-remember the ’30s.

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