

The Ugly US-American and Anthropology's Reckoning

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Five days after the attack on the Capitol, Stephen Colbert unhesitatingly identified the insurgents as fascists, urging Kevin McCarthy to realize that “if you flirt with fascism long enough, before you know it, you’re married with two kids: Adolf and Benito”.¹ Interviewed in 1990, Ivana Trump had no qualms in revealing that her husband reads “from time to time” Hitler’s collected speeches, keeping the book by his bed. Bearing in mind Victor Klemperer’s *LTI*, an ethnography of the “Third Reich”, it becomes evident that Trump applies Hitler’s lessons about propaganda: repeat continually a simple narrative made of excessive lies, finger-pointing, superlatives and belittling nicknames. Without hesitation either President Trump called violent protesters draped in neo-Nazi symbols in Charlottesville and the Capitol “very fine” and “special” people, publicly vindicating fascists. And yet, nearly all leading Republicans continue to support Trump, often citing their responsibility towards their constituents. These incidents attest a disturbing normalcy of fascism’s presence within US society, a normalcy which represents both a dangerous political development and a central accomplishment of Trump’s presidency: ennobling “The Ugly American” in the public forum.

The politically ugly US-American was common coinage among the oppressed during the Cold War in which US-administrations wreaked havoc throughout the world and at home—e.g., committing war crimes in Vietnam, overthrowing democratically elected but unwanted governments in Guatemala or Chile, killing or locking up citizens struggling for civil rights as put forward by the FBI’s COINTELPRO. Brutally repressed activists in the US decried the fascist quality of oppression at home and abroad, captured in the chant “USA, SA, SS”. But then, in



Ruben (1970, 14–5)

¹ This essay is responding to a much-needed call for papers on American Fascism of the *Cultural Anthropology* Editorial Collective, January 13, 2021. They have chosen 15 other essays for publication but I want to contribute to the discussion of US fascism anyway—the issue is too important to remain silent. See <https://culanth.org/about/about-the-society/announcements/submissions-open-for-a-hot-spots-series-on-american-fascism>.

the 1990s, having seemingly won the Cold War and contained the domestic resistance, the ugly US-American departed from the scene. His public presence did gain visibility with Bush's strongman War on Terror and the open resort to torture, but only to be cloaked again during the Obama presidency. A poster boy for liberal democracy and diversity, Obama managed to hide the ugly US-American from view, while setting a lasting record in drone killing and leaving racist oppression intact, especially for people branded "illegal". Domestic fascism, thriving on the *longue durée*-cluster of systemic racism and white supremacy, was subsequently embraced by the Trump administration and its allies, part of a concerted effort to resignify the ugly American in order to make him look great on the world stage. So, how come?

Here, a look at Germany's recent history might help. Especially relevant is Klaus Theweleit's *Male Fantasies*, an analysis of memoirs written by former Freikorps members. When revolutionaries toppled the German monarchy in 1918, social democratic leaders joined forces with the military and assembled Freikorps to repress revolutionaries, its most prominent victim being Rosa Luxemburg. These militias made up the core of the Nazi movement nascent in 1919. Theweleit shows in detail how the Freikorps' memory literature revolves around one fear-arousing topic: "femininity", perceived as a flood of an infectious weakness, a threatening ubiquitous force which dilutes all that is solid into formless shapes. Elaborating on the fascist mind, Theweleit then sets aside usual criteria for "fascism" like authoritarian leadership, anti-democratic politics etc., and singles out violence instead: For the fascist mindset violence is the sole solution to conflicts. Consequently, the fear of femininity is interpreted by Theweleit as a symbol of fearing change which only "male" violence can stop.

This might provide insight into the ugly but ennobled US-American resurgent that was enabled to storm the center of political power, carrying Confederate flags or wearing Auschwitz-shirts: People deeply afraid of change who resort to violence—afraid of the demographic change which, according to the Census, will lead in 2045 to a majority of non-whites in the US, of profound economic changes in the wake of deindustrialization, of the shattering of seemingly "traditional" forms of gender and family into myriads of alternatives, and, finally, of losing political, economic, and cultural hegemony. The riotous confrontations are battles of retreat of white supremacy and masculinity, for USA's future will be diverse. Don't get me wrong: I'm not arguing that fascism will disappear due to demography or the like. Fascist groups will persist, as "whiteness" is very malleable in acquiring new significations. The Republican Party's opening up already worked out well in Florida where it drew unprecedented support from Latinx and Black voters alike. Resorting to fascism in order to deal with threatening changes will always be an attractive option to people who claim a superiority they are unsure of.

Where does this leave anthropology? Anthropology as a discipline has long contributed to the disguising of fascism, avoiding far too long the causes for political oppression and social suffering. Nor have we answered Laura Nader's call to study up. Not promoting substantial productions of ethnographic knowledge about corporate America and elites is a devastating failure of our purposes clothed in fine rhetoric. We still avoid acknowledging systemic violence as our major subject and the necessity of kinship and patronage for the modern organization of power. Both flaws blind us to the disastrous effects of "meritocracy" on democratic equality, shielding inequality. White supremacy—militias, KKK, etc. drawing members from low class to white picket fences to elites, as well as PoC joining white supremacists—needs to be a "normal" subject matter, just as non-whites are. "Without exaggerated hopes [...] to change the world", as Lila Abu-Lughod once wrote, we could at least highlight the real ugliness of transnational fascism, countering efforts to convert the ugly US American into an attractive model worldwide. The debate about Teitelbaum's ethnography of fascists has shown that a native's point of view is not sufficient. Being neutral is being affirmative. Taking a stand on fascism gets anthropology real, only then we can't be caught in surprise anymore when a "beacon of light" votes in high numbers for an ugly administration. When democracy is under attack, the relevance of anthropology is also at stake.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Iannis Carras, Laura Glauser, Fabio Santos and Eileen Vardag for critique and helpful suggestions.

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