



## On tyranny: twenty lessons from the twentieth century

by Timothy Snyder, New York, Tim Duggan Books, 2017, 128 pp., \$9.99 (Paperback), ISBN 9780804190114

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“History does not repeat, but it does instruct” (2017, 9) is Timothy Snyder’s opening line in *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*. The book provides a powerful warning against a cavalier attitude regarding the vigour of American democracy. Through discussing 20 brief historical lessons, it demonstrates how one can and should learn from the mistakes made throughout history, proposes ways in which one can recognize tyranny and fascism and distils the habits to fight totalitarianism. Snyder lists deeds one needs to cultivate, and constantly rehearse, that may protect oneself and one’s nation from being stricken with tyrannical establishments and fascism.

The book is printed shortly after Donald J. Trump was elected. However, Snyder, by no means, indicates that he is a fascist; as a matter of fact, he never uses the president’s name directly as he seems to be cautious not to overstress the case. Snyder’s main points of argument are that American citizens ought to learn lessons from when Stalinism, Nazism and fascism overrode earlier democratic regimes between 1920s and 1940s in Europe, so that the perturbing similarities flaunted by Trump’s actions and statements do not progress further down that road. In other words, drawing upon 20 lessons, Snyder’s illustrates how Trump’s ascendancy is on a slippery slope toward tyranny. The author clarifies how to give attention on abstruse changes, and how to spot the symbols and signs of despotism and tyranny.

The author also develops an account to recommend what one may need to do or not to do if the worst does occur. Therefore, the book has also some thematic frames; (1) *community*, which needs to be defended and participated, (2) *language and truth*, which needs to be sought, payed and respected, (3) *taking risk*, which demands standing up, or least, not surrendering to the crowds or drowsy minds, (4) *historical*, where one needs to apprehend that history is not fictional or ineluctable and finally (5) *patriotism*, which needs to be distinguished from nationalism. According to him, nationalists incite us to be our worst, while telling us that we are the best (2017, 113).

I suppose this book has a precious place on the current debate about right-wing populism for its clear outline and reference to auxiliary literature, along with the significant historical parallels which make the fault lines of history detectable. In addition, the book appeals to a broad audience, including researchers, students and interested laypeople, aiming to warn them how democracies can die from inside and how terrifying are the stories of fascism. Each page of this book contains punchy and quotable epithets. Here is an excerpt from the passage, and a prime example, of what is a careful yet emphatic way in which the author makes clear the cross-roads to its readers.

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. (Snyder 2017, 71)

There are also a few things that can put some readers off. To begin with, one drawback is that the writing may feel a bit rushed to some readers. One may argue that Snyder could have worked on the outline to carry more nuance to the text. In the same light, Snyder's thesis is short, barely goes beyond the surface of a huge topic, which requires more contemplation than he can perhaps deliver given the format.

Moreover, Snyder's emphasis is utterly focusing on American contexts. Therefore, non-American readers have to go over a few things that are only convincing to an American audience. For instance, Snyder stands firm on the significance of being "patriotic" and what it represents to be a "patriot." Some readers may dislike the term; however, it is fathomable that patriotism has certain overtones within the American contexts that do not have similar connotations elsewhere. Nevertheless, the shapes of totalitarianism are so similar around the globe that even a non-American audience can make analogies and draw manifold conclusions from Snyder's book.

Another shortcoming of this book might be Snyder's selective approach. The author sets out to postulate lessons about totalitarian and tyrannical regimes from the twentieth century but proceeds to merely provide cases from the Soviet Union and Europe. This might be Snyder's area of interest and expertise, but he could have either


elucidate from the start that the examples are being very selective or offer cases from the wide variety of other tyrannical regimes in the twentieth century.


Despite these shortcomings, the book convincingly and timely shows that the current situation in the US displays more than a few loose parallels to the rise of authoritarianism elsewhere in the world. The book thus delivers not only lessons from history but also carries an important message that all democracies are fragile and that they can actually die from within.

## References

Snyder, T. (2017). *On tyranny: Twenty lessons from the twentieth century*. New York: Tim Duggan Books.

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