

No, Nazis were Not Leftists: Or, How to Debunk Right-Wing Propaganda

It is generally considered good practice not to “feed the trolls”— that is, not to engage in commentary with strangers on the internet who thrive on aggressive verbal hate and cruelty. But when the president himself is little more than a troll and the entire right-wing media apparatus increasingly relies on weaponized trolling (as well as the overwhelming spread of misinformation) as a primary means of producing propaganda, it becomes necessary to occasionally step up and defend ideas and history from the perversion of alternate realities.

That brings us to the inspiration for this piece: a [recent article](#) in the right-wing website The Federalist titled “Read a Pile of Top Nazis Talking about How they Love Leftist Marxism” by Paul Jossey. The subtitle is “From the moment they enter the political fray, young right-wingers are told, ‘You own the Nazis.’ Much of the historical record says exactly the opposite.” The article begins with this in-your-face provocation: “The Nazis were leftists.” I hope that most of our readers will instantly recognize the absurdity of the article from those few lines, but it warrants examining in closer detail to understand exactly what the author is trying to do and why.

First of all, what is The Federalist? It is clearly a [right-wing website](#) whose main driving force is to oppose gay marriage and whose main contributors are connected to those ubiquitous right-wing plutocrats, The Koch Brothers. The website itself strangely provides no information or mission statement in the form of an “About” page, but they do use this uncredited line as a footer: “Be lovers of freedom and anxious

for the fray," a quote that apparently comes from a 1918 speech by Calvin Coolidge, of all people. The Nazi article in question is categorized as "History," and the author's past publications all seem to be revolve around fake free speech grievances.

The introduction concludes by stating "But evidence Adolf Hitler's gang were men of the left, while debatable, is compelling." It is interesting to note that the author does not go so far as to apologize directly for the Nazis, or to explain why they "weren't really so bad." Let's stop for a moment and at least recognize and praise this author for not supporting or praising the Nazis. The fact that this has to be emphasized says something revealing about the toxic state of political discourse in this country.

Everything else the author does in his article, however, is part of a cynical ploy to rewrite history by cherry-picking isolated facts and fitting them into a false context. The author claims that his thesis, that the Nazis were actually Leftists, is debatable, but compelling. *It is actually neither.* No actual historian or political scientist maintains has gone on the record to claim that Nazis were Leftists. Accordingly, there is no citation given of any such person in the article because they don't exist. This means that the author's thesis is not actually debatable. It is settled history. I am not personally an academic specialist in the Nazi party, but I am an amateur historian with two history degrees who has read and thought much about World War Two over the course of my life. A very quick bit of research has led me to conclude with a high degree of certainty that there is basically universal consensus by scholars that the Nazis occupied territory on the far-right of the political spectrum. The few skeptics to the "far-right-wing Nazi consensus" seem to place more emphasis on the *sui generis* nature of the Nazi political beast by characterizing it as neither right nor left, but a unique populist syncretic movement. Even such a rare

opinion does not go so far as to characterize the Nazis as unequivocal members of "the Left". That is because it is by definition an absurd and offensive statement. That is like saying that Nazis were secretly communists because of a short-lived and cynical peace treaty with Josef Stalin (Actually, the author does make that ridiculous point in the article). There is no new history to be written on the main, big picture history of World War Two and the Nazi party. There is no hitherto secret knowledge or conspiracy that the author has just revealed despite decades of settled history determining what everyone knew at the time and until now: the Nazis were a far-right party—as far right as a party could conceivably be on the political spectrum. Everything else in the article is merely lies and propaganda (which are usually the same thing) to further his own right-wing views.

It is not hard to imagine why one wouldn't want to share ideological real estate with the Nazis, and once again I do in fact applaud the author for not wanting to admit such. The fact remains though, that they were a hyper-right-wing party, and he is an ideologue in the far-right-wing American conservative movement. That is why he attempts to portray the Nazis as a *Leftist* party—to make himself and his likeminded peers feel better about themselves while simultaneously making the other guys look bad. He might as well just wave his arms and shout at the top of his lungs "I'm not a Nazi! You're the Nazi!" This playground tactic is actually a well-known and useful tool of propaganda called "transference" or "projection." It is one of the many techniques of propaganda I mentioned in my article of the same name ([The Techniques of Propaganda](#)). The current president famously does it nearly everytime he speaks, most famously in a debate with Hillary Clinton when he screamed "No Puppet! No Puppet! You're the puppet!" The fact that he is, in fact, a puppet is secondary to the strategy of constantly maintaining a consistently aggressive and mendacious stance towards political foes in an attempt to smear *them* with *your* own crimes and faults. This is

also a type of “whataboutism” which has long been used by Trump’s mentor, Putin. It’s like saying “Yeah, the Nazis were bad, but *what about* Stalin and Mao?! (or Native American genocide or slavery?!)” It shouldn’t be too hard to understand that such statements are intentionally intellectually dishonest distractions from the point, but the fact remains that for a lot of people, especially ones primed to follow right-wing talking points and emotionally based arguments, such propaganda is often quite effective.

The second paragraph of the article continues by citing the infamous right-wing polemicist and fake historian [Dinesh D’Souza](#) as one of the sources of recent alternative histories. The author then claims that “the vitriol and lack of candor [such “alternative histories] produces from supposedly fact-driven academics and media is disturbing, if unsurprising. They stifle dissent on touchy subjects to maintain their narrative and enforce cultural hegemony.” Lots of big words and academic-sounding language here, all in an effort to say “why do experts call us out when we make shit up?” D’Souza is a convicted felon, provocateur, and far-right hack who is popular with theocratic crowds for writing a ton of “history” books that completely make shit up and basically blame “liberals” for everything from slavery to 9/11. The fact that D’Souza is the only person cited in the article regarding such “alternative histories” is telling. He even appears to have written a trashy “history” book in 2017 called *The Big Lie* claiming contrary to all evidence that Hitler and his coterie were “secret leftists,” a dog-eared copy of which is no doubt on the author’s shelf. For real historians, fact-checking D’Souza is like playing Super Mario Brothers with the cheat codes on, and luckily for us there is a tireless history professor named [Kevin Kruse](#) who has taken up this challenge.

The author continues by saying that “alternative views of the Third Reich exist and were written by the finest minds of their time,” and claims that such opinions “perhaps carry more

weight because they are unburdened by the aftermath of the uniquely heinous Nazi crimes.” Once again, props to the author for having the courage to admit that Nazi crimes were heinous, something becoming more difficult by the day for many of his fellow travelers. Even the president, famously even-minded and hesitant to draw hasty conclusions, wouldn’t want to go so far because there were probably many “good people” on the Nazi side. Anyway, the only “finest mind” that the author cites in the entire article is a certain Austrian economist, F.A. Hayek. Hayek does have the benefit of having actually rejected and fled the Nazi regime in real-time, which not every German-speaking intellectual could claim (looking at you, [Martin Heidegger](#)). He was also a life-long friend of liberal philosopher Karl Popper despite their many political differences, which reflects well on Hayek in my book (Popper’s *The Open Society and its Enemies* was written in 1944, the same year as Hayek’s *The Road to Serfdom* was published. Here is my [article](#) on Popper explaining why I find him more convincing than Hayek). He has also been basically the main, and the only, inspiration for that always dubious and now-extinct animal known as the “reasonable, principled right-wing intellectual.”

If we are to be generous and fair to Hayek, we must admit that he was apparently a relatively honorable person with some nuanced and well-considered positions on politics and economics. For the purposes of right-wing politicians, it has long been enough to cite him as the simplified intellectual basis for their dogma that free markets must always be unfettered and wealth must never be distributed by the government (by which they mean of course that it should never be distributed *downwards*; they have always been happy to distribute it *upwards*). This was the dogma of the Thatcher-Reagan axis, but it could have just as easily been Ayn Rand rather than Hayek providing the “philosophy.” In any case, the author here has used a few throwaway, out-of-context phrases from early Hayek to make his entire case that the Nazis were

leftists. In addition, Hayek loved dictators and somehow made the case that authoritarianism (which he supported!) was different than totalitarianism (which he was against). He personally supported and sometimes collaborated and befriended right-wing dictators and war criminals like Pinochet (he claimed that Allende was totalitarian!) and Salazar (maybe let's reconsider that thing I said about his being "honorable"). So that is a summary of the most intellectually important right-wing thinker of the century.

The official name of the Nazis was the National Socialist German Workers' Party. They didn't like to be called Nazis. If you look carefully, you will even find the word "Socialist" (not to mention "Workers") in the name of party. This must mean they were Socialist, and, *tout court*, Leftist. Case closed. I guess all this actually proves is that political parties choose names that do not always signify their actual ideology. This is more common outside of America, with the Polish Law and Justice party, the Brazilian Social Liberal Party, the French Socialist party, and the Australian Liberal party coming immediately to mind (not to mention the Russian United Russia party). The author goes on to give example after cherry-picked example of actual Nazis making quotes that make them appear friendly to what we think of as Socialism, or of denigrating the "western capitalists" of the time. He says, for example, "Hayek describes Nazism as a 'genuine socialist movement' and thus left-wing by modern American standards." That's a pretty big red herring, oversimplification, and non sequitur all in one short phrase (three techniques of propaganda! Go read my previous [essay](#) and learn them all by name). He goes on to say, "British elites regarded Nazism as a virulent capitalist reaction against enlightened socialism—a view that persists today." Yeah, it persists because it's the historical truth. By the way, that's actually being far too gentle with Nazism—calling it a "virulent capitalist reaction" is probably the most unsuperlative thing you could truthfully say about it—and "British elites" (many of whom actually

supported Hitler up to and, in some cases, during the war).

As the article continues, the author gives some ad hoc definitions of “right” and “left”, and their sloppiness illuminates the ways he probably thinks his is a logically sound argument. He says the “right” consists of “free-market capitalists, who think the individual is the primary political unit, believes in property rights, and are generally distrustful of government by unaccountable agencies and government solutions to social problems. They view family and civil institutions, such as church, as needed checks on state power.” He says the “left” consists of people who “distrust the excesses and inequality capitalism produces. They give primacy to group rights and identity. They believe factors like race, ethnicity, and sex compose the primary political unit. They don’t believe in strong property rights...They believe the free market has failed to solve issues like campaign finance, income inequality, minimum wage, access to health care, and righting past injustices. These people talk about ‘democracy’—the method of collective decisions.” He then claims that these definitions prove somehow that the Nazis were Leftists.

The only thing he didn’t say about the “left” is that they have a penchant for human sacrifice and cannibalism. If you think there is something just a bit made up, just a bit Fox-Newsy about his definitions, you are not wrong. Obviously it is not easy to portray all the nuance of the variagated “right-left” political spectrum with such facile definitions, especially considering the disconnect between economic and cultural perspectives. There is a convincing case to be made that from the “right” perspective, everything that they think is wrong with the world is de facto part of the “left.” If you define everything not you as bad, and everything bad as “left,” Nazis will by necessity become leftists. Much of today’s “right” also thinks of the “left” exclusively in terms of identity, as opposed to other political ideology. Thus,

anything in history that used identity in bad, or deviant ways was therefore part of a leftist plot or conspiracy. It would be easier to list the key words and ideas generally associated with each camp. In political science, it is generally accepted that the “left” tends to emphasize ideas like freedom (!), equality, fraternity, rights, progress, reform, and internationalism, while the “right” tends to emphasize ideas like authority (!), hierarchy, order, duty, tradition, reaction, and nationalism. Any disputes here? I didn’t think so.

You might have noticed those key words of freedom, and authority. Despite the American right-wing appropriation of the word, they misunderstand and detest real freedom and always tend towards authority over liberty. Usually what they mean when they talk about freedom is that they support the freedom to think and act just like they do, which is obviously no kind of freedom at all. The centrality of sexual and religious politics in American right-wing ideology is enough to illustrate their primacy of authority over freedom. Some theorists maintain that there is a natural authoritarianism and oppression of the lower orders in conservatism in general; [Corey Robin](#) in *The Reactionary Mind* says that “Though it is often claimed that the left stands for equality while the right stands for freedom, this notion misstates the actual disagreement between right and left. Historically, the conservative has favored liberty for the higher orders and constraint for the lower orders. What the conservative sees and dislikes in equality, in other words, is not a threat to freedom but its extension. For in that extension, he sees a loss of his own freedom.” Authority is the main hallmark of not only authoritarian (obviously) and totalitarian systems, but also conservatism writ large. Jeffrey Herf in his book *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich*, argues that the Nazis mixed enthusiasm for technology with a total rejection of Enlightenment values as a radical alternative to liberal and

socialist visions of modernity. Umberto Eco's tour de force essay "[Ur-Fascism](#)" gives 14 characteristics of Wittgensteinian "family resemblance" that can be found in all forms of fascism. Nowhere in this exhaustive list can you find anything remotely "leftist." Basically, the Nazi regime was reptilian, terroristic, totalitarian, and extremely right-wing.

For those who shout "What about Stalin?!", the answer is that the Soviet Union, especially under Stalin, was also a right-wing terroristic totalitarian regime, despite the supposed "leftism" of Communist ideology that could be traced back to said Enlightenment values. The Soviet Union was never really Communist in anything but name, but from the beginning governed as just another kleptocratic oligarchy much more authoritarian than any Tsar ever dreamed of. Vladimir Nabokov, in his memoirs, calls the Bolsheviks (who assassinated his father, by the way) "fascists." So the answer is that the Nazis weren't "leftist," but that the Soviet Union was actually "rightist." You might ask if I'm being serious here or just engaging in my own propagandistic sophistry, à la the author of that hideous article. Reader, do your own research and make up your own mind. Don't believe anything you read on the internet. Especially on websites like The Federalist. Read history.

On Plato, Donald Trump, and the Ship of State

Plato's most famous work and the foundational text of political philosophy is the *Republic*. Written in the form of a dialogue between Socrates and other real-life Athenians, the book opens with a discussion about the nature of justice and

then proceeds into Plato's ideas about what an ideal state and its leader would look like. I will argue how these ideas are still relevant nowadays, especially regarding the disturbing state of American politics in which the American people are considering electing for the first time an openly authoritarian leader who is blatantly unqualified for the job.

Plato, an aristocrat, held a deep antipathy for democracy; he had lived through the defeat of Athens at the hand of Sparta as well as the condemnation of his mentor, Socrates. He blamed democracy for these twin catastrophes. His own ideal state would actually bear strong resemblance to Sparta—a totalitarian state in which a small elite trained for success in battle, the majority were disenfranchised slaves who did all the labor, and all cultural activities were forbidden. Bertrand Russell in his *History of Western Philosophy* summarized Plato's *Republic* as follows:

"When we ask: what will Plato's Republic achieve? The answer is rather humdrum. It will achieve success in wars against roughly equal populations, and it will secure a livelihood for a certain small number of people. It will almost certainly produce no art or science, because of its rigidity; in this respect, as in others, it will be like Sparta. In spite of all the fine talk, skill in war and enough to eat is all that will be achieved. Plato had lived through famine and defeat in Athens; perhaps, subconsciously, he thought the avoidance of these evils the best that statesmanship could accomplish."

Russell goes on in his criticism, answering the question of how and why Plato could have achieved such greatness despite having, frankly, mostly terrible ideas:

"Plato possessed the art to dress up illiberal suggestions in such a way that they deceived future ages, which admired the *Republic* without ever becoming aware of what was involved in its proposals. It has always been correct to praise Plato, but

not to understand him. This is the common fate of great men. My object is the opposite. I wish to understand him, but to treat him with as little reverence as if he were a contemporary English or American advocate of totalitarianism."

Plato's Non-Ideal Republic in Practice

Indeed, the millennia of admiration for Plato's *Republic* came to a sudden end when Russell's *History* and Karl Popper's *The Open Society and Its Enemies* were published in the same year—1945. No coincidence that both were written during the Second World War at the height of the destruction wrought by demented dictators and dangerous ideas. Popper's was perhaps the first, and still most important work, that separates Plato from the humanistic and democratic ideas of Socrates, and shows rather that Plato's ideal state was a totalitarian one. The overriding theme of the book, which follows the thread of totalitarianism from Plato and Aristotle to Hegel and Marx, is how all these philosophers relied on historicism, a false theory in which history unfolds according the universal laws, to enable dangerous ideas to follow. He accused all of these thinkers of being partially culpable in leading Europe towards the crisis of leadership and war contemporaneous with the book's publishing. Popper argues instead for a strong defense of the open society, which protects liberal values and institutes reforms without violence. One relevant issue Popper also discusses is the [Paradox of Intolerance](#), which says that for an Open Society to flourish, we must not be tolerant of intolerance (which include the type of hate speech, bigotry, and violent rhetoric that is becoming normalized in Donald Trump's Republican Party).

The most famous parable from the *Republic* is that of The Cave, whose premise about Plato's theory of ideas most undergraduates would be familiar. Much more useful, in my

opinion, however, is the parable of the Ship of State. Imagine the state as a ship, whose captain is a skilled stargazing navigator. The citizens are sailors, who may have many various skills but are not qualified to pilot the ship, especially through rough weather. The sailors mock the captain and try to replace him, but ultimately he is the only one with the ability to lead them. In Plato's view, the captain in a state should be a philosopher-king, wise and trained at birth for his position as total ruler. One sees that democracy and Plato do not mix well—for him, the people were a mob who could not rule themselves.

Let's bring these analogies into present day America.

As far as I can tell, America is the longest running large democracy in history, though a number of smaller polities, such as Iceland or the old Iroquois Confederation, to name two, are certainly older. For a huge and diverse nation of over 300 million people that has the world's largest economy and strongest military, the fact that it has survived 240 years and a bloody civil war without ever deviating from a democratic and peaceful transition of power is quite amazing. Unprecedented actually. It was taken for granted when the Founding Fathers drew up the Constitution that Athenian-style democracy could only ever end in manipulation of the mob, or *demos*, by a demagogue or tyrant. They drew up a system of checks and balances between branches of government in which no person could amass enough power to take over the government, and through which change would necessarily be slow and conservative. This has often frustrated the ability to pass needed reforms, but has also the greater benefit of preserving the system peacefully.

Past American Presidents

Never in American history, discounting the obvious case of the Civil War, has the original political system drawn up in the Constitution come under threat of being radically altered. Likewise, there has never been a single person in American history who has had the power, or even sought the power, to completely control government in anything even resembling a dictatorship. Out of all the 44 presidents (Grover Cleveland served non-consecutive terms and is counted twice), historians typically agree on Andrew Johnson as the worst. It was certainly Abraham Lincoln's biggest mistake to name him his Vice President for short-sighted and unnecessary electoral reasons before his reelection, and Johnson's horrible term had awful ramifications for the next century regarding the reconstruction of the South. Even so, it is hard to find any American president who was unqualified to hold the office, in the traditional sense of having the ability and experience to operate an executive organization with delegated tasks and many moving parts. This has nothing to do with ideology, or even effectiveness, but of basic qualifications for the job before taking office. Several highly successful generals had either mostly good, mixed, or awful administrations (Eisenhower, Jackson, and Grant, for example), but their qualifications were never questioned despite their success or lack thereof. Herbert Hoover is generally considered an awful president mostly due to the Great Depression beginning on his watch, but he was highly successful in his private career and as the head of the U.S. Food Administration during WWI and Secretary of Commerce under two presidents before being elected, and was thus very qualified. Even George W. Bush, whom [historians](#) will most likely rank closer to Andrew Johnson than Franklin Roosevelt, governed the second largest state before becoming president. Most presidents have been highly educated and experienced men (obviously all men to date) with military backgrounds and terms as senators, congressmen, or

governors. Men who understood something about the world and also how government works at various levels. The most successful presidents have also had temperaments suited for the rigorous stressfulness of this unique position as well as the ability to listen to advisors and learn from mistakes. To have a combination of many of these rare skills is what is wanted in a president, as well as a certain degree of other abstract qualities like intellectual curiosity, integrity, and empathy.

The Ideal Leader in a Democracy

Basically, I would argue that we want the same thing today as Plato wanted, even if we have different ways of going about it. Even if they will not be philosopher-kings, our leaders should be the best among us, and chosen by an informed electorate. They should be highly skilled at steering the large and unwieldy ship of state even in the rough waters of domestic and international politics. Plato, a member of the hereditary aristocracy and an anti-democrat, thought that these leaders should be bred from birth for the role, with the rest of the people having no say in the matter. There is another meaning of aristocracy, which is merely “rule by the best”, not involving genetics or inheritance but pure merit through earned experience, training, and natural character, and selected for by the majority of citizens. In our democracy, even with the two major political parties nominating candidates for the office of president, there has long been a de facto sorting out of the best qualified candidates. Once again, this has nothing to do with ideology but of basic minimum ability to function in a very complex role. Despite differences in ideas by the parties and the electorate, there has always been a tacit understanding that the winner will uphold the duties of his office and continue to serve in the government for the people.

The Disqualification of Donald Trump

Thus, we have never before in American history been in the position we are currently in—namely, to have a major party candidate for president who is clearly and without any doubt unqualified and unsuited for the office that he seeks. The Republican Party, once a bastion of principled conservatism, respect for law, and personal responsibility, has become so [radical and reactionary](#) over the last three decades or so that it has nominated a person who would certainly be the most disastrous, irresponsible, and unqualified president in history, and the closest we have yet come to a dictator, however petty. Trump's open disregard for the rule of law, free press, and clear lack of basic knowledge of the world and the government he would operate is a disqualification for president. His [other temperamental flaws](#), his proudly open bigotry (the likes of which has not been seen in a major candidate since there was legal slavery), his shocking, world historical level of narcissism and mendacity (unprecedented even for a would-be politician), and other shallow but toxic policy ideas are almost beside the point—any one of these attributes should easily have disqualified Trump from coming anywhere near being an realistic candidate for president, but the ultimate fact that he has none of the necessary tools to meet the minimum standards for piloting the ship of state is the single most important fact. He is not trained or experienced in anything like running the executive branch of the richest and strongest military power on Earth. He has shown no ability to succeed in anything other than making his own name universally known, however he goes about that. He is not a stargazer who can pilot America through bad storms, nor is he someone who should have instant control over soldiers' lives and nuclear weapons.

The Republican Party, for the first time in American history,

has failed in the basic task of nominating a human who is at a basic level of qualification for the office of president. There is no need to get any more into the details of how and why this happened--[this article](#) gives a brief summary of how the Republican Party began moving rightward three decades ago and cynically cultivating deep distrust of government itself for its own electoral gain, and this is the result. The most important thing is that Trump be defeated at all costs, and that a strong warning is cried out that never again will We the American people tolerate such a denigration of our hallowed tradition for maintaining a functioning democracy, whatever differences of policy and ideology. I disagree with Plato's sentiment that democracy is a bad thing. It is not a perfect system; it is merely less bad than every other possible system. Its strength, and also its only flaw, is that it ultimately depends on an electorate that votes in the best interests of the peaceful and prosperous survival of the state, and not on a single tyrant who manipulates the mob with promises to solve all problems on his own. Let's hope that we can continue for at least another 240 years without such a threat and an affront to our great country.