

KNOW- IT-ALL SOCIETY

TRUTH AND ARROGANCE IN POLITICAL CULTURE

MICHAEL PATRICK LYNCH

AUTHOR OF *THE INTERNET OF US*

Contents



PREAMBLE: NO ORDINARY QUESTION	1
1. MONTAIGNE'S WARNING	9
Nothing More Wretched	9
Like Ears of Corn	14
A Very Social Attitude	18
2. THE OUTRAGE FACTORY	27
Google Knows All	27
Fake News and Information Pollution	30
Sharing Emotions	35
3. WHERE THE SPADE TURNS	51
Why We Don't Change Our Minds	51
What Kind of Person Are You?	53
From Belief to Conviction	62

4. IDEOLOGIES OF ARROGANCE	
AND THE AMERICAN RIGHT	75
Roots of Authoritarianism.	75
Telling It Like It Is	79
The Logic of Status Threat	84
Arrogance, Ignorance, and Contempt	92
5. LIBERALISM AND THE PHILOSOPHY	
OF IDENTITY POLITICS	103
Arrogant Liberals	103
Misunderstanding the Politics of Identity	104
The Rationality Brand	121
The Politics of Contempt	130
6. TRUTH AND HUMILITY AS DEMOCRATIC VALUES. .	139
Socratic Lessons.	139
Intellectual Humility	149
A Space of Reasons	154
Truth and Democracy	163
 ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	 171
 NOTES	 173
 REFERENCES AND ADDITIONAL SOURCES	 183
 INDEX	 197



Ideologies of Arrogance and the American Right

Roots of Authoritarianism

The “amazing fact,” wrote the German philosopher Hannah Arendt in 1945, after two world wars and the Holocaust, is not that a dictator’s followers are willing to tolerate evil in his name. The amazing fact is that they don’t waver even “when the monster begins to devour its own children.”¹ This lack of concern for the interest of their citizens (on the part of the dictators) and for their own interest (on the part of the citizens) deeply puzzled rival states and outside observers at the time. “The fanaticism of members of totalitarian movements, so clearly different in quality from the greatest loyalty of members of ordinary parties, is produced by the lack of self-interest of masses who are quite prepared to sacrifice themselves.”²

Arendt was concerned with specifically totalitarian move-

KNOW-IT-ALL SOCIETY

ments such as fascism, but many of her observations apply to authoritarian states in general. She points out that outsiders' puzzlement about the motivations of authoritarian leaders can be strategically helpful to those leaders. In the case of Hitler, it made him unpredictable, simply because his reasons for doing things, and the reasons for his followers to go along, did not seem to make sense to many observers at the time. As Timothy Snyder, a historian of the Holocaust, has pointed out, one explanation for this unpredictability is that the Nazi movement in particular was not nationalist in a strict sense of that term.³ That's because Nazi ideology wasn't geared toward, or motivated by, a typical liberal conception of national self-interest.⁴

Nazi ideology regarded national borders and institutions as tools to be used and then discarded when they were no longer needed. What was essential to Nazi ideology was blood (race) and soil (geography). The former marked the true divisions between the tribes of humanity; the latter referred to the idea that in order to prosper and feed themselves, racial tribes must compete for land. Once this racist ideology was accepted as a grand narrative, the standard economic models of the time—models that took it in the interest of nations to look out for the individual interests of their citizens—were less effective for understanding Nazi intentions.

The nature of Nazi ideology illustrates a general point about the psychology of authoritarian politics. Authoritarian rulers cultivate among members of the public two seemingly incompatible attitudes that nonetheless actually reinforce one another. The first

ARROGANCE AND THE AMERICAN RIGHT

is a feeling of defensiveness due to real or imagined persecution—the idea that somehow one's race or tribe or culture is under threat. In Hitler's eyes, "culture" meant Aryan culture, the tribe was the Aryan race, and the threat was a feared lack of land and food production. The other attitude is the felt sense of the tribe's inherent superiority—again, in Hitler's case, racial superiority. In almost all cases this superiority, racial or otherwise, is seen as emerging from history—a history whose secrets the dictator claims to have unveiled against the wishes of the enemy. Once this history is revealed, once the secret proclaimed, the people are told they will regain what was rightfully theirs all along. They only have to follow the leader.

This combination of perceived superiority and defensive insecurity provides a fertile psychosocial breeding ground for first resentment, and then hate. The attitudes naturally reinforce each other. Those who suffer from insecurity in the face of a perceived threat are prone to bolster their self-esteem by claims of superiority; those who claim superiority naturally regard those who disagree with them as a threat. Compounded many times and reinforced with the stirring power of a narrative, feelings of superiority combined with insecurity encourage not only racism and hostility but the more general idea that one's tribe has hold of both the true and the good, that it can't be wrong about what really matters, and that these facts should infuse policy and political action. It encourages, in other words, tribal arrogance.

People are attracted to arrogance. It is a powerful drug because it is so simple: it produces a feeling of power that requires no actual

power, a feeling of knowledge that requires no knowledge. And it is easy to confuse arrogance with confidence, especially if you are feeling insecure and put upon. It is thus not surprising that ideologies built on tribal arrogance encourage loyalty, but not one based on content, as Arendt knew: "Total loyalty is possible only when fidelity is emptied of a concrete content, from which changes of mind might naturally arise."⁵ Details only hem in those seeking tyrannical power. As Arendt notes, one of Hitler's greatest political achievements lay in overcoming the National Socialist Party platform, "not by changing or officially abolishing it, but simply refusing to talk about it or discuss its points."⁶

What was important, Hitler knew, was not having rational, detailed policies. Political power lay in stoking the combination of anxiety and perceived superiority, and hence the hateful arrogance of the tribe. That was the force that could cause members of the tribe to ignore an overreach of the dictator, even when he came to eat his own children. The point is not what ideas are presented but how they are presented, whether they resonate with the underlying attitudes and anxieties motivating the target public. As Arendt points out, "The form of infallible prediction in which these concepts were presented has become more important than their content."⁷

As specific content becomes less important, so does truth. Arendt is chillingly clear on this point: "The chief qualification of a mass leader has become unending infallibility; he can never admit an error."⁸ For, to admit an error is to admit that there is something more powerful than you, that your triumph—and

hence the movement's—may not be inevitable. As a consequence, she writes, speaking across the decades, "before mass leaders seize the power to fit reality to their lies, their propaganda is marked by its extreme contempt for facts as such, for in their opinion, fact depends entirely on the power of the man who can fabricate it."⁹

An ideology of arrogance is an ideology of the insecure and the defensive, and it is an ideology that at bottom must be hostile to truth, lest it wither in the face of the facts.

Telling It Like It Is

Arendt's analysis of the role of truth in authoritarian politics, and how those governed by such politics are willing to put their interests aside, is a universal thesis built on a historical example. Current American politics gives us other examples.

One of the puzzles of Donald Trump's rise in American politics is the overwhelming support he received from evangelical Christians during the 2016 campaign. That support mystified commentators on the Left and more than a few evangelicals themselves, since Trump seems to represent the very opposite of Christian values: greed, intolerance, selfishness, and a lack of humility. Not to mention that for much of his career he had taken stances on issues like abortion and gay marriage far from those found in typical conservative Christian circles. Nonetheless, the support was there, and real.

It is this puzzle that evangelical writer Stephen Strang set

out to address in his 2017 book *God and Donald Trump*. Strang, a publisher and CEO of Charisma Media (which published the book) campaigned for Trump; his bio on the book's jacket even proclaims that he attended the "election night victory party in New York." The book's unsubtle subtext is that the very fact that so many mainstream Republicans and liberals *were* puzzled about evangelical support for Trump is one reason he won the election. The "dominant progressive culture," Strang says, missed the point, and thereby displayed its basic ignorance of both the evangelical movement and many American voters.

Strang's explanation for why evangelicals supported Trump comes in two parts. The first part is a now-familiar cultural narrative. Trump understood the "deep resentment of the men and women in the flyover zones who felt their country was being ripped from their fingers and their moral heritage being squandered."¹⁰ These voters, writes Strang, "were tired of the government's lurch towards globalism in the Obama administration. They were concerned about the impact undocumented immigrants were having in their communities and they were rightfully afraid of the threat of radical Islamic Terrorism."¹¹ Early on in the campaign, Strang writes, he came to "believe Donald Trump shared those emotions," although he confesses to having been worried as to how much was a matter of "tactics" and how much was "genuine concern for the future of the nation."¹²

Nonetheless, throughout the book Strang makes the case that for many evangelicals, the important thing about Trump was not whether he shared their faith *per se*, or even whether he shared

all the same values. As Strang himself admits, while he *thinks* Trump is a Christian, it is not clear that Trump understands the difference between evangelical Christianity and mainline Protestantism.¹³ The important thing, says Strang, is that Trump "tells it like it is"—even when, and especially when—"the way it is" is unpopular on the Left. In a telling passage, Strang discusses Trump's speech at the 2016 Republican National Convention—the speech in which he famously declared that the nation was in crisis, that crime was running rampant, and that "nobody knows the system better than me, which is why I alone can fix it." To the mainstream media, Strang notes, the speech was darkly dystopian; but to "those who agreed with Trump's vision for America . . . his words were encouraging, largely because someone was finally speaking the truth."¹⁴

Aristotle famously (and rightly) said that to speak the truth is to say of what is, that it is, and of what is not, that it is not. Understood that way, the idea that Trump excels at truth telling is, well, bizarre. He is willing to say almost anything and is notoriously untethered from the facts. (This is the man, after all, who gave a rambling, inappropriate speech to the Boy Scouts of America and then—in the face of direct denials by the organization's leader and his desperate attempts to distance the organization from the speech—declared they had told him "it was the greatest speech ever made to them.") So rather than arguing the point, we should be asking what is meant by phrases like "he tells it like it is" or "he speaks the truth" when used in this sort of context.

There are at least two salient interpretations. Understood one

way, for example, to say of someone that they “speak the truth” is to say not that they describe the objective facts, but that they are willing to speak of what is momentous and hidden and to do so no matter what the consequences. This is the revelatory use of the phrase “tells it like it is.” And many Trump supporters do see Trump as willing to state what they think of as momentous hidden “facts”—such as that climate change is a hoax, or that immigrants are taking over the country—which those in the “mainstream media” are not willing to take seriously. Such views are momentous in that those who hold them perceive them to be of grave, possibly even sacred, importance; but they are hidden in that—again, in the eyes of those who hold them—they’ve been deliberately obscured or ignored.

Another use of the phrase “tells it like it is” is what we might call the emotional use. Telling it like it is or speaking the truth can also mean saying what you *feel*. The “it” that one tells here is not the world but oneself. And what attracts some, perhaps many, of Trump’s supporters is not *what* he says, but his expression of anger, resentment, and supreme confidence when he says it. There is no apology for those feelings, no backing down. *That* is what many people are responding to when they say that Trump speaks the truth. It is not the content of his views but *the feelings he gives voice to—feelings that they think have been denied or that they have been belittled for experiencing*. As the sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild notes, Trump’s ability to give voice to shared emotional truth often elated his followers in a way that cemented tribal loyalty. It was the elation of having one’s attitudes validated.

And the “desire to hold on to this elation became a matter of emotional self-interest.”¹⁵ Voting for Trump, in this view, wasn’t just a matter of supporting someone with the right policies or even the right values. It was supporting someone who shared their attitudes and was willing to publicly express them.

This basic ambiguity of phrases like “tells it like it is”—trading between “uncovering the hidden facts” and “saying what you really feel”—often goes unnoticed by those on the Left. But the emotional and the revelatory uses help to explain why this phrase resonates with Trump supporters. It also helps to explain why so many of them seem, at least to their opponents, to be immune from the facts. If you distrust the media and scientific institutions, it is not surprising that citing media sources and scientific evidence is not going to be persuasive. But it is also not surprising that you’ll think that the media is obscuring deep “truths.” For it is the nature of “hidden facts” that they are bound to fly in the face of more widely accepted truths. Moreover, because cultural narratives embody our attitudes, and those narratives can, in turn, determine the convictions that form our self-identity, the validation of your attitudes and feelings means the validation of that identity. To those who share these attitudes and the convictions that go with them, “telling it like it is” means giving voice to that identity. Evidence is beside the point, and citing facts will just seem like an attack on one’s identity.

Crucially, Strang makes just this point himself. As noted, he emphasizes the importance of Trump “sharing emotions” right from the outset; the worry is not whether Trump shares a policy

vision, but whether he is being emotionally authentic. But as I've noted, Strang also adds a second part to his argument: an explicitly theological explanation of why it made sense for evangelicals to support Trump. He quotes former Watergate conspirator and now evangelical minister Chuck Colson's idea of "common grace." As Strang explains it, "A key aspect of the concept holds that secular leaders are raised up in times of great historical consequence to protect God's agenda and His purposes. Such leaders are chosen for a unique role, whether or not they may actually know God or even care about doing His will."¹⁶

This, Strang suggests, is precisely what has happened to Trump. He has been chosen by God, and it shouldn't really matter to evangelicals whether Trump is a Christian or has Christian values. The point is that he has been chosen to lead his supporters to power. To think otherwise is to ignore the common grace that God has given in his mercy. So, it is perhaps not surprising that Strang brings out his greatest invectives for Christian leaders like the Southern Baptist Russell Moore, who vocally opposed Trump during the campaign. Opposing Trump, Strang thinks, is tantamount to opposing the will of God.

The Logic of Status Threat

The question of why so many evangelicals supported Trump is just one instance of a larger question, one that was of clear interest to Arendt: why people support authoritarian leaders even when—

and especially when—they are "willing to devour their own children." Strang's kind of answer, as we've seen, is solidly cultural, religious, and psychological, not economic. It is about identity and attitude, not money.

To some, however, this kind of explanation rings false for just this reason, particularly in the case of Trump. According to this counternarrative, the real reason people wanted to support Trump, the real reason they wanted to burn the house down, was not because he validated their attitudes, but because they are fundamentally frustrated with an economic system rife with inequality—a system that has rewarded coastal elites and left the rest of what coastal elites refer to as "flyover country" behind.

This economic explanation features prominently in a general and ongoing debate over strategy on the Left. According to one side of the debate, represented by political analyst Thomas Frank and others, a major reason that the Democrats lost the 2016 presidential election is that they assumed people were supporting Trump only out of racism or sexism.¹⁷ The thought is that this assumption led to two fundamental errors. First, by dismissing Trump voters as "deplorables"—to use Hillary Clinton's notorious phrasing—progressives displayed an arrogant moral superiority that only served to galvanize the opposition.¹⁸ Second, by focusing solely on racist and sexist motivations, Democrats missed the single issue that galvanized followers of both Trump and Sanders: an economic power structure that benefits the elite over the vast majority of the working class. On this reading, Trump supporters were motivated to vote primarily because of economic class, not

because of race, sex, gender, or other cultural issues. And ignoring that fact, according to this line of thought, continues to make the Left vulnerable.

There is no doubt that many Americans view those on the Left as arrogant know-it-alls looking down their nose at the rest of the country. Moreover, and as we'll see later, there is more than an element of truth to this charge—although not, perhaps, for the reasons that some have thought. But the point I wish to make here is simpler—namely, that much of the debate over the 2016 election rests on the assumption that we must choose between either culture or the economy to explain why so much of white America voted for Trump. That is a false dilemma. There is a third choice: that the cultural and the economic explanations, both of which capture an element of the truth, are in fact *different expressions of a more general fact*. And interestingly, it is a fact that Strang's analysis clearly supports as being explanatory: that many white Christian males voted for Trump because they felt that, in cultural and/or economic ways, the "American way of life" was under attack and they feared a perceived loss of status that would result.

The political scientist Diana Murtz has collected data over a wide-ranging series of studies that points to just this fact. Perceived threats to the "American way of life," her studies show, were a reliable indicator of support for Trump in the 2016 election.¹⁹ In essence, Murtz argues, white Christian Americans who felt a threat to (1) their status in society and/or (2) the nation's status in the world were most likely not only to vote for Trump but to do so even if they had previously voted Democratic. And significantly,

the studies suggest that many of these voters had felt neither sort of status threat during previous elections. They had acquired one or both types over the last few years.

This point is important for two reasons. First, it goes against the received wisdom that political campaigns can't (at least generally) give people new motivations to vote, but just make their existing motivations more salient ("It's the economy, stupid!"). It suggests that the Trump campaign actually did succeed in motivating at least some voters in a new way: by encouraging fear of a loss of personal or national status. Second, it helps to explain why those voters who newly came to these motivations would vote for Trump. What it suggests, Murtz argues, is that people who came to experience status threat—who, in other words, were increasingly convinced of a threat to either personal status or national status—were prone to support the candidate who emphasized reestablishment of past hierarchies. For white people who were suddenly fearful, for example, that they were soon not going to be in the racial majority, or that whites were more discriminated against in the United States than blacks (yes, some people believe that), a candidate who promised to "make America great again" was intuitively appealing.

The crucial point here is that the status-threat explanation is consistent with the perceived threats coming from different sources. For some people, the greatest perceived threat may indeed be racial: fear of a future in which whites are no longer a majority of the population. For others, it might include gender-based fears: the fear by men of being supplanted by women in power roles.

For others, that threat might, as the “left-behind” thesis suggests, be economic: the fear that global trade policies are undermining America’s ability to compete with other countries and thus maintain its status as the strongest economy in the world—an economy with stable jobs for, among others, white males. For still others, the perceived threat might consist in the fear that Christian values are no longer dominating discussions in the public sphere. Or it might be a combination of all of these.

What links these fears, what makes them similar, is that they are each, in their different way, a reaction to a real or perceived threat to the cultural status of certain interlocking groups of voters. And Murtz’s point—and I think, interestingly, also Strang’s—is that this threat to status is what matters most, for the simple reason that, as her data suggests, its presence continues to predict support for Trump whether or not, for example, one has experienced economic hardship or personally felt discriminated against as a white person.

Status threat does not require the kind of overt racism or sexism consisting of explicit beliefs that minorities or women are morally or intellectually inferior. Most Trump voters indignantly reject the idea that they are racist or sexist in this overt sense—and rightly point out that they are no more overtly racist or sexist than are many liberals.²⁰ *Overt* racism and sexism can be beside the point when it comes to status threat. Threats to racial status can be felt simply on the basis of more subtle kinds negative racial, religious, or gender attitudes—for example, the perception that women or minorities are “sufficiently powerful to be a threat

to the status quo.”²¹ As Murtz’s research reveals, the same “individuals who perceive whites as more discriminated against than minorities also see Christians and men as experiencing greater discrimination than Muslims or women, despite the former groups’ dominant status.”²²

During the Trump campaign, these feelings were brilliantly distilled not only by “Make America Great Again” but by “America First,” which turned out to be another usefully ambiguous slogan. Initially, commentators treated it as expressing a simple isolationist mind-set—an endorsement of the policy that elected officials should look after the national interest, and should put it above the interests of other nations (perhaps, as some have thought, because the United States is “exceptional” or “historically unique”). But for Trump and many of his most ardent followers, the “first” in “America First” means simply “the winner” or “the best.”

Understood in this way, “America First” doesn’t state a policy; it expresses an attitude: that America is superior—not just as a matter of contingent historical fact, but *intrinsically*. The nation is tarnished, perhaps, by years of Democratic leadership, and in need of a bit of Trumpian polish to let its gold leaf shine through; but it is the best, the most winning, just the same. To understand the phrase “America First” in this way is to see it, like “tells it like it is,” as emotionally expressive—not an endorsement or statement in any intellectual sense; it expresses an attitude that has, paradoxically, become more entrenched in American culture even as events make it harder to rationally justify. And the attitude extends beyond just the political realm—all the way, for many

whites, to cultural identity itself. America's true greatness lies in its having created the greatest way of life that could *ever* be—a way seen hazily in beer commercials, in which white Christian Americans play a privileged part. A threat to that image—whether real or just perceived—therefore creates anxiety.

This kind of anxiety can itself encourage resentment. Hochschild offers a perceptive analogy. It is as if conservative whites in the United States see themselves as having been patiently waiting in line for the American dream. But as they wait, they hear that other people—many of them looking very different from them—are “cutting in line.” Moreover, various people far ahead of them in line—richer people who live on the coasts, perhaps—are holding spots for these other, browner people. Seeing this, they seethe with resentment. And they seethe even more when people farther up in line tell them to stop feeling resentment. By this analysis, Trump is like a person already at the head of the line who calls back and validates your feelings and promises to hold *your place* in the line and to prevent line cutters from taking that place away from you. It doesn't matter that he isn't much like you—that he is, in fact, more like the people you resent. Indeed, it helps; that's what gets him his place farther up the line.

The analogy with standing in line is illuminating for several different reasons. It helps to explain the kind of resentment at play among many supporters of Trump in this country. And it explains the willingness to believe Trump's repeated insistence that his wealth is what makes him the best man for the job—because if the job is reaching back and helping largely white voters to cut in line, it does.

But there is another point here, not emphasized by Hochschild but suggested by the analogy of the line cutter: Trump voters' resentment stems from the perception that they have lost their *rightful* place farther up the line. If you know (or think you do) that you *deserve* to be farther up the line than you are, then of course you'll feel angry at anyone ahead of you, and you'll look for explanations. And you'll put tremendous stock in those explanations, treating them not just as guesses, or even just as beliefs. They'll become convictions, part of your self-identity. When people criticize you for holding them and for being resentful, you'll be defensive. It will seem like you are under attack, like people are telling you what to feel. But the idea that you've lost your rightful place in line assumes *that there was such a thing as a “rightful” place to begin with*. The idea that there are rightful starting places, and that some people have one that is farther ahead than other people who are not white, is one of the oldest racial tropes there is—and one of the most dangerous. When liberals criticize Trump voters' resentment, they are reacting to that trope. They are saying that white people shouldn't feel resentment *because they are white*.

Naturally, that is not how many Trump voters regard the basis of their resentment. They've worked for what they have. They should be farther along than they are. These are reasonable views, and thus, as we've noted, it is entirely reasonable to think that income inequality also generates status threat—either on its own or mixed up with racial fears. What's important is not to fall into thinking that it is either just identity/cultural issues or the economy that explains white support for Trump. The better

explanation points to attitudes that both issues can encourage. And tellingly, the sociological analysis (from the outside) dovetails with Strang's analysis (from the inside) of why Trump voters are filled with resentment and anxiety. The point in both cases is that many whites supporting Trump do so because of their attitudes—because they fear they've lost their rightful place in line and are anxious and angry because of that fear.

These very attitudes, together with the internal logic of status-threat anxiety, feed authoritarian politics. Arendt is clear on this point: "Politically speaking, tribal nationalism always insists that its own people are surrounded by 'a world of enemies,' 'one against all,' that a fundamental difference exists between this people and all others." Yet at the same time, "it claims its people to be unique, individual, incompatible with all others."²³ In other words, the language of nationalism is a language that speaks to status anxiety; it is the language of tribal arrogance.

Arrogance, Ignorance, and Contempt

I want to be clear about the arguments I am, and am not, making here. What I've been arguing is that the rise of nationalism and authoritarian politics is often related to the rise of a widely shared defensive psychosocial attitude—status threat. Status threat, I've claimed, is explanatorily distinct, but often stems from, either economic fears or racist fears or both. Those who feel status threat are apt to identify with political ideologies and narratives that

encourage tribal arrogance, that promise a return to greatness, and that remind them they are really superior and deserve to be at the head of the line. And as Arendt has pointed out, such ideologies of arrogance are deeply dangerous.

What I'm *not* saying is that all conservative-leaning Americans have actively embraced this political viewpoint or feel status threat to begin with. The existence of conservative resisters to Trump—both within and without the administration—should make that obvious. Many conservative intellectuals—from Ross Douthat, to David Brooks, to Arthur Brooks and Jonah Goldberg—have been keen to distinguish political conservatism from the nationalist politics defended by Trump and his followers. Indeed, the distinction between more traditional conservatism and the ideologies of arrogance that I've been discussing is crucial, because we are still in the midst of a battle over cultural narratives. It behooves both sides of any war—literal or cultural—to declare that everyone is firmly committed to one side or the other. But that is almost never the case. Rather, many people will only lean slightly one way or the other. So if you want to win the culture war, or even defuse it, you need to understand that fact; you need to realize that the war is fought in the trenches of conviction. That is, it is fought over whose narratives can turn weakly held beliefs into strong convictions.

As opposed to middle-of-the-road conservatives, many on the far Right, I think, see this very clearly. They have sucked the nectar of arrogance and embrace its distortion of truth as a friend. A good example is the kind of conspiracy theory that

KNOW-IT-ALL SOCIETY

Put together, the two faces of delusion at work in tribal arrogance constitute something similar to Sartre's bad faith—a lived denial of the evidence that is made all the easier by the pollution and corruption of the information environment.³⁰ Such corruption creates an environment in which almost anything can be taken seriously; almost any claim, no matter how crazy, can be found credible. That corrupt information environment, in turn, makes it possible to be both gullible and cynical at the same time—in precisely the way we often see manifested online in the sorts of conspiracy theories that propagate there. The combination of gullibility and cynicism enables bad faith on a massive scale—a scale particularly useful to authoritarian leaders looking to promote ideologies of arrogance. As Arendt notes, "Under such conditions, one could make people believe the most fantastic statements one day, and trust that if the next day they were given irrefutable proof of their falsehood, they would take refuge in cynicism; instead of deserting the leaders who had lied to them, they would protest that they had known all along that the statement was a lie and would admire the leaders for their superior tactical cleverness."³¹

Yet the bad faith at the heart of intellectual arrogance can stretch even beyond the ignoring of evidence. Arrogance distorts our relationship to truth itself. When we fall victim to it, we fall victim to the idea that, to some extent, *our worldview is correct just because it is ours*.

There are two things this can mean. First, it might mean an equation of ego with truth. That often happens, as Arendt pointed

ARROGANCE AND THE AMERICAN RIGHT

out, in the case of authoritarian leaders. If a leader believes that the correctness of his views consists in their truth, then he may act as if his beliefs are true just because he has them.³² It is as if he thinks he's a god; he thinks that if he believes p , then p . Note that this doesn't mean he can't change his mind, or that if he believes p then he must always believe p . What it does mean (assuming classical negation) is that if not p , then he does not believe p , and if he comes to believe not p , then not p . The divine may change his mind, but when he does, reality changes too.³³ This is a bizarre conception of truth, and no one could hold it coherently. But I never said intellectual arrogance makes sense.

Yet this is not the only way, and probably not the most common way that extreme intellectual arrogance pops up in our lives—or in authoritarian leaders. The second way arrogance can distort one's relationship to truth stems from not caring about truth in the first place. For certain people, especially certain powerful people, what matters—what, in their view, makes their opinions correct—is not that they have a hold on the truth but that they have power, or brilliance, or wealth. What matters is something else, something connected to their self-esteem. Bad faith toward the truth works at the tribal level too. It can encourage the thought that if the relevant group or community is convinced of something, then it is true. Or it may be that the truth of the matter is simply unimportant or ignored. What matters is group loyalty. Might makes right, and truth is irrelevant.

It is worth noting that the bad faith at work in arrogance means that it is more than just simple close-mindedness.³⁴ You

can end up being close-minded without identifying with a larger cultural narrative or being defensive about its truth. You might just be surrounded by information pollution, or lack critical thinking skills or the relevant concepts, or live where government prevents people, perhaps via censorship, from engaging in debate. Arrogance, on the other hand, is dogmatic close-mindedness that stems from bad faith, from a delusion about the basis of one's confidence.

Over the last few chapters, I've been arguing that our lives online and off encourage our natural inclination to think that we—that is, those who share our identities and convictions—have figured it all out, that we know it all. Our use of social media, for example, exploits tribal anxieties and attitudes that can feed intellectual arrogance. Attitudes like arrogance, in turn, become cemented into our narratives and blind convictions. The result is a cycle of sorts: attitudes like intellectual arrogance are embodied by convictions, which themselves encourage those attitudes.

The point I've been making in the last few pages is that certain political ideologies play into this cycle: they speed it up by shaping the narratives that turn beliefs into blind convictions and, in turn, both reflect and encourage intellectual arrogance. They do so, we've found, in four main ways. First, the ideologies of arrogance exploit the natural and perfectly normal human desire for status and shared identity; second, they encourage loyalty to the tribe at all costs; third, they are hierarchical and adopt a politics of "us" over "them"; and fourth, they express a distorted and self-deceptive view of truth and its importance.

Strang and Arendt teach us that ideologies of arrogance can bear no counterexamples. If you believe in your inherent moral superiority, then mistakes must be defensively denied or explained away. That's not surprising: arrogance is often a compensation for something—a perceived failure or loss—and as we've seen, it brings with it self-defensiveness, which brooks no admission of error. Recent battles over immigration, health care, and climate change illustrate this essential character of arrogance. Because of a real or perceived threat to an ideology of cultural or racial entitlement, many people are willing to follow conviction over the facts, to hold that these are problems caused not by Americans but by others, and the right prescription is to build a wall of purity between us. While these cases are important in themselves, taken together over the last decade they have had a snowball effect. They've caused many white Americans not to become more open or tolerant but to dig in on their beliefs, to denounce those who see room for cultural improvement—whether that be in terms of race relations or health care or transgender rights—as traitors to the very idea of the "real America."