

On the Conditions of Ignorance

August 24, 2017

In a recent article from Politico, a new poll was discussed that suggests that nearly half, 49 percent, of Trump supporters believe that he won the popular vote in the 2016 election. (He didn't; he lost by nearly three million votes.) Spurred on by Trump's claims that millions (!) of people voted illegally in the election, this portion of Trump's base have been lied to and misled by a politician they think they can trust. What are we to make of this?



The standard liberal response to news such as this seems to be a mixture of ridicule and rage-fueled contempt. Trump supporters are dehumanized by Liberals who make them out to be a seething mass of ignorance and who write them off as hopelessly malevolent. Adding insult to injury, when tragedy strikes areas of the country that are composed of a majority of Trump supporters, it is not compassion by callous disregard that is voiced by far too many members of the liberal commentariat.

An Altnet opinion piece from last month is indicative of this kind of scorn. Speaking of Trump supporters, the piece says that they "have evolved into a breed of ill-informed, willfully ignorant yokels whose devotion to their Orange Julius Caesar borders on cult worship."

There's a lot to unpack there.

Perhaps the most dangerous notion in that quote is that Trump supporters are somehow personally responsible for their ignorance. To believe that is, ironically, ignorant; it displays an ignorance of the ideological, educational, and material conditions that govern the lives of Trump supporters (and, really, us all). Trump supporters, after all, are people who live in a country that has media outlets—like Fox News and Breitbart—that feed them skewed/perverted perspectives and that showcase "news" that warp their worldviews through outright lies and misinformation. Furthermore, Trump supporters are also very often people who fear economic downturns and job loss; they followed, and continue to follow, Donald Trump because he promised them economic security and jobs during a campaign where his main political rival bragged about putting coal miners out of work and offered little but cheap platitudes about America's greatness.

If a person lives in a misinformation bubble of right-wing conspiracy media and has daily anxiety about the opportunities available for themselves and/or their children, of course they are going to be in a position to be taken advantage of. Donald Trump, conman that he is, preys on the misinformed and disadvantaged because he knows he can manipulate them and get them to believe in him. When a group of people is desperate, they will turn to a person who says the things they want to hear. Trump knew that during the campaign, and he knows that now. While he is certainly not a clever person in a lot of ways, he is an idiot savant at manipulating the uninformed.

This is why Trump said he loves the "poorly educated;" he knows he can exploit them. And *this* is why he named Betsy DeVos—a woman who has no experience with, and has an antipathy toward, public education—as the head of the Department of Education; he wants to keep his base, and everyone else for that matter, uneducated, ignorant, and easily exploitable.

Rather than train *all* of their venom on the man who exploits the ignorant, liberals, as we have seen, direct at least some of their scorn and hatred *towards the exploited*. That the ignorant are not ignorant by choice but rather by manipulation is not something these liberals seem to understand. If people are ignorant about certain matters—such as the results of the popular vote—it is not because they want to be; it is because the systems and people they look to for guidance, such as their schools, their news sources, and their elected leaders, *want to keep them misinformed and exploitable*.

Of course, not all ignorances are created equal, and there are important caveats that need to be mentioned in this discussion. A skewed notion about the results of the 2016 election is not the same, for example, as racism, homophobia/transphobia, or xenophobia. Certainly, there are many Trump supporters who display such vile bigotries, and these cannot be as easily forgiven or forgotten. Furthermore, the violent racism on display in the White Supremacist/Neo-Nazi segment of Trump supporters (such as the repulsive bigots who rioted in Charlottesville) is not merely the result of being misinformed. The Trump supporters in this category transcend mere ignorance and are, instead, quite purposefully malevolent and hateful. They do not have a predilection for distrusting minorities because of an economic anxiety manipulated and twisted by propaganda (like many in the Trump camp). Instead, they *hate* minorities because they deem them to be genetically inferior human beings, which is a view that deserves absolutely *no* attempt at understanding and must be stamped out.

The garden variety Trump supporter, however, is not the rage-fueled Neo-Nazi hell-bent on ethnic cleansing but, rather, a person with ignorances, and all ignorances ultimately stem, or are at least greatly fostered by, material and ideological conditions. These conditions, such as the exploitative economic system of capitalism and manipulative news sources, are devious in their ubiquity, which can make them hard to recognize as the reason for misinformation and ignorance. Still, they create the conditions of ignorance that make persons exploitable, and blaming the victims of these conditions *for* their exploitation is deeply disturbing.

Plus, it doesn't help anything.

Every time a liberal writes off a Trump supporter as a hopeless degenerate, all that happens is that those Trump supporters get more entrenched in their worldview that everyone who isn't with them is their enemy. And they become more and more likely to view Trump as the only person they can trust. In their scathing attacks on Trump supporters' for their ignorance, liberals are playing right into Trump's hands.

Which means that, as Leftists and progressives, we have a lot of slack to pick up. We have to reject the bigotries to be found amongst Trump supporters while, at the same time, never losing sight of the fact that those bigotries don't grow out of nowhere; they are fermented and allowed to grow because they serve the interests of the ruling class. When the working class voting bloc is divided into smaller groups, when we are fed misinformation and lies by our media and political officials, and when we are manipulated into hating each other, we are that much more easily exploitable.

Trump voters don't know it, but their true enemy is Donald Trump, and we need to fight for the material and educational conditions that will allow them to realize that. We need to fight for universal healthcare, universal higher education, and increased job security and wages both because all of those things are good in and of themselves *and* because they will, ultimately, battle the conditions and sources of the ignorance that the political ruling class so maliciously uses to manipulate people. When people are provided with healthcare, when they don't have to work themselves to death just to scrape by, and when they have higher educational opportunities to help foster critical thinking and learning, then they are all the more equipped to see through and reject

the divisive propaganda of the ruling class. (This is not to say that a college education is the *only* way to combat ignorance. I certainly think, however, that some of the opportunities provided by universities—such as the in-depth interrogations of historical events offered by history courses or the eye opening experience of a really good philosophy course that inspires the student to let nothing go unexamined—can be tools to combat propaganda and received biases/bigotries).

No one chooses to be ignorant. No one chooses to be misinformed or lied to. We should hate ignorance, and we should hate the conditions and persons who help to create and spread ignorance, but hating the ignorant only means further cementing divisions that ultimately make us weaker. Fighting for a better world means fighting for people with views that we may find abhorrent. While we cannot force someone out of ignorance, we can push for the material and ideological conditions wherein ignorance is much harder to foster and people are much harder to exploit. Fighting to improve material conditions and raising class-consciousness, ultimately, are mutually reinforcing tactics.