

## On Tyranny: twenty lessons from the twentieth century – by Timothy Snyder

*RWF Residential Weekend 19 – 21 May 2017 at Wortley Hall*

“All power comes from the people. But where does it go?”

– Bertolt Brecht

### **An Introduction:**

This review of Timothy Snyder’s *On Tyranny: twenty lessons from the twentieth century* <https://www.penguin.co.uk/authors/timothy-snyder/1056619/>, was posted on the Facebook page of the Raymond Williams Foundation on 03 March 2017. Because this book is rooted in the populist politics of our times, concerns itself with the careful use of language, the autonomy of the person and touches topics for discussion at The Raymond Williams Residential Weekend – May 2017 it is reproduced here, together with two verbatim extracts which others may find very thought provoking.

### **The Review:**

This is a slim volume, small enough to put in your back pocket, and handy to read while standing in a queue or waiting at the dentist. It is exceptionally brief at about 100 pages of text. The font size is large and the page margins are wide, giving an air of very carefully chosen words that are few in number.

Snyder is Housam Professor of History at Yale University and a recognised contemporary writer on how easy it was for 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe to fall under the heels of the dictatorial and authoritarian regimes that it did. His expertise led him to distil twenty lessons from European history and write them up for an American reader. However, given the rise of “populism” on each side of the Atlantic, this tiny book resonates powerfully with us also.

The clarity and simplicity of Snyder’s language are simultaneously chilling and uplifting. The book is chilling in that he shows how near we now are to undermining democracy in “the West” (after all we have travelled this road before). It is equally uplifting in that he floodlights the path (which we have also travelled before) that citizens and voters must now take to safeguard our democracies.

There is no space or time left to “give Trump time to see how he turns out in office”. Neither is there time to give UKIP the benefit of the doubt by saying “but they do make some good points”. We must not be cowed by the contemporary challenge to pluralist democracy. As Snyder might express it, each one of us must take whatever small or large actions that are within our means – and courage – trusting that others will be with us.

Each of the “Twenty Lessons” is written in about 50 words and is followed by a very short essay of about 250-500 words. Each *Lesson*, plus its essay, is a freestanding read in its own right, making an ideal introduction for up to 20 discussion circles.

I have already posted Lesson 10, on the nature of so-called “post-truth” on this Facebook page.  
*end*

### **Two Extracts:**

The first extract is all the *Twenty Lessons*, verbatim.

The second extract is the supporting essay supporting *Lesson 10, Believe in Truth*, verbatim.

## **On Tyranny: twenty lessons from the twentieth century – Timothy Snyder**

The following *Twenty Lessons* have been retyped, verbatim, from the above book; published in the UK 02 March 2017. They are lessons drawn from European history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and addressed to citizens of the USA. Given the rise of “populism” in Europe, these *Lessons* deserve wide circulation on both shores of the Atlantic. I hope that guardians of copyright will be kind to me.

David Whalley

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05 March 2017

### **1 Do not obey in advance.**

Most of the power of authoritarianism is freely given. In times like these, individuals think ahead about what a more repressive government will want, and then offer themselves without being asked. A citizen who adapts in this way is teaching power what it can do.

### **2 Defend institutions.**

It is institutions that help us to preserve decency. They need our help as well. Do not speak of “our institutions” unless you make them yours by acting on their behalf. Institutions do not protect themselves. They fall one after the other unless each is defended from the beginning. So choose an institution you care about – a court, a newspaper, a law, a labor union – and take its side.

### **3 Beware the one-party state.**

The parties that remade states and suppressed rivals were not omnipotent from the start. They exploited an historic moment to make political life impossible for their opponents. So support the multi-party system and defend the rule of democratic elections. Vote in local and state elections while you can. Consider running for office.

### **4 Take responsibility for the face of the world.**

The symbols of today enable the reality of tomorrow. Notice the swastikas and the other signs of hate. Do not look away, and do not get used to them. Remove them yourself and set an example for others to do so.

### **5 Remember professional ethics.**

When political leaders set a negative example, professional examples become more important. It is hard to subvert a rule-of-law state without lawyers, or to hold show trials without judges. Authoritarians need obedient civil servants, and concentration camp directors seek businessmen interested in cheap labor.

### **6 Be wary of paramilitaries.**

When the men with guns who have always claimed to be against the system start wearing uniforms and marching with torches and pictures of a leader, the end is nigh. When the pro-leader paramilitary and the official police and military intermingle, the end has come.

### **7 Be reflective if you must be armed.**

If you carry a weapon in public service, may God bless you and keep you. But know that evils of the past involved policemen and soldiers finding themselves, one day, doing irregular things. Be ready to say no.

### **8 Stand out.**

Someone has to. It is easy to follow along. It can feel strange to do or say something different. But without that unease, there is no freedom. Remember Rosa Parks. The moment you set an example, the spell of the status quo is broken, and others will follow.

### **9 Be kind to our language.**

Avoid pronouncing the phrases everyone else does. Think up your own way of speaking, even if only to convey that thing you think everyone is saying. Make an effort to separate yourself from the internet. Read books.

**10 Believe in Truth.**

To abandon facts is to abandon freedom. If nothing is true, then no one can criticize power, because there is no basis upon which to do so. If nothing is true, then all is spectacle. The biggest wallet pays for the most blinding lights.

**11 Investigate.**

Figure things out for yourself. Spend more time with long articles. Subsidise investigative journalism by subscribing to print media. Realise that some of what is on the internet is there to harm you. Learn about sites that investigate propaganda campaigns (some of which come from abroad). Take responsibility for what you communicate to others.

**12 Make eye contact and small talk.**

This is not just polite. It is part of being a citizen and a responsible member of society. It is also a way to stay in touch with your surroundings, break down social barriers, and understand whom you should and should not trust. If we enter a culture of denunciation, you will want to know the psychological landscape of your daily life.

**13 Practice corporeal politics.**

Power wants your body softening in your chair and your emotions dissipating on the screen. Get outside. Put your body in unfamiliar places with unfamiliar people. Make new friends and march with them.

**14 Establish a private life.**

Nastier rulers will use what they know about you to push you around. Scrub your computer of malware on a regular basis. Remember that email is skywriting. Consider using alternative forms of the internet, or simply using it less. Have personal exchanges in person. For the same reason, resolve any legal trouble. Tyrants seek the hook on which to hang you. Try not to have hooks.

**15 Contribute to good causes.**

Be active in organisations, political or not, that express your own view of life. Pick a charity or two and set up autopay. Then you will have made a free choice that supports civil society and helps others to do good.

**16 Learn from peers in other countries.**

Keep up your friendships abroad, or make new friends in other countries. The present difficulties in the United States are an element of a larger trend. And no country is going to find a solution by itself. Make sure you and your family have passports.

**17 Listen for dangerous words.**

Be alert to the use of the words *extremism* and *terrorism*. Be alive to the fatal notions of *emergency* and *exception*. Be angry about the treacherous use of patriotic vocabulary.

**18 Be calm when the unthinkable arrives.**

Modern tyrant is terror management. When the terrorist attack comes, remember that authoritarians exploit such events in order to consolidate power. The sudden disaster that requires the end of checks and balances, the dissolution of opposition parties, the suspension of freedom of expression, the right to a fair trial, and so on, is the oldest trick in the Hitlerian book. *Do not fall for it.*

**19 Be a patriot.**

Set a good example of what America means for the generations to come. They will need it.

**20 Be as courageous as you can.**

If none of us is prepared to die for freedom, then all of us will die under tyranny.

*end*

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### **Believe in Truth**

**To abandon facts is to abandon freedom. If nothing is true, then no one can criticize power, because there is no basis upon which to do so. If nothing is true, then all is spectacle. The biggest wallet pays for the most blinding lights.**

You submit to tyranny when you renounce the difference between what you want to hear and what is actually the case. This renunciation of reality can feel natural and pleasant, but the result is your demise as an individual – and thus the collapse of any political system that depends upon individualism. As observers of totalitarianism such as Victor Klemperer noticed, truth dies in four modes, all of which we have just witnessed.

The first mode is the open hostility to verifiable reality, which takes the form of presenting inventions and lies as if they were facts. The president does this at a high rate and at a fast pace. One attempt during the 2016 campaign to track his utterances found that 78 percent of his factual claims were false. This proportion is so high that it makes the correct assertions seem like unintended oversights on the path toward total fiction. Demeaning the world as it is begins the creation of a fictional counterworld.

The second mode is shamanistic incantation. As Klemperer noted, the fascist style depends upon “endless repetition”, designed to make the fictional plausible and the criminal desirable. The systematic use of nicknames such as “Lyin’ Ted” and “Crooked Hillary” displaced certain character traits that more appropriately have been affixed to the president himself. Yet through blunt repetition over Twitter, our president managed the transformation of individuals into stereotypes that people then spoke aloud. At rallies, the repeated chants of “Build that wall” and “Lock her up” did not describe anything that the president had specific plans to do, but their very grandiosity established a connection between him and his audience.

The next mode is magical thinking, or the open embrace of contradiction. The president’s campaign involved the promises of cutting taxes for everyone, eliminating the national debt, and increasing spending on both social policy and national defense. These promises mutually contradict. It is as if a farmer said he were taking an egg from the henhouse, boiling it whole and serving it to his wife, and also poaching it and serving it to his children, and then returning it to the hen unbroken, and then watching as the chick hatches.

Accepting untruth of this radical kind requires a blatant abandonment of reason. Klemperer’s descriptions of losing friends in Germany in 1933 over the issue of magical thinking ring eerily true today. One of his former students implored him to “abandon yourself to your feelings, and you must always focus on the *Fuhrer’s* greatness, rather than on the discomfort you are feeling at present. Twelve years later, after all the atrocities, and at the end of the war that Germany had clearly lost, an amputated soldier told Klemperer that Hitler “has never lied yet. I believe in Hitler.”

The final mode is misplaced faith. It involves the sort of self-deifying claims the president made when he said that “I alone can solve it” or “I am your voice”. When faith descends from heaven to earth in this way, no room remains for the small truths of our individual discernment and experience. What terrified Klemperer was the way that this transition seemed permanent. Once truth had become oracular rather than factual, evidence was irrelevant. At the end of the war a worker told Klemperer that “understanding is useless, you have to have faith. I believe in the *Fuhrer*.”

Eugene Ionesco, the great Romanian playwright, watched one friend after another slip away into the language of fascism in the 1930s. The experience became the basis for his 1959

absurdist play, *Rhinoceros*, in which those who fall prey to propaganda are transformed into giant horned beasts. Of his own personal experiences Ionesco wrote:

*University professors, students, intellectuals were turning Nazi, becoming Iron Guards, one after the other. At the beginning, certainly they were not Nazis. About fifteen of us would get together to talk and to try to find arguments opposing theirs. It was not easy. . . . From time to time one of our friends said: "I don't agree with them, to be sure, but on certain points, nevertheless, I must admit, for example, the Jews. . . .," etc. And this was a symptom. Three weeks later, this person would become a Nazi. He was caught in the mechanism, he accepted everything, he became a rhinoceros. Towards the end, only three or four of us were still resisting."*

Ionesco's aim was to help us see just how bizarre propaganda actually is, but how normal it seems to those who yield to it. By using the absurd image of the rhinoceros, Ionesco was trying to shock people into noticing the strangeness of what was actually happening.

The rhinoceri are roaming through our neurological savannahs. We now find ourselves very much concerned with something we call post-truth," and we tend to think that its scorn of everyday facts and its construction of alternative realities is something new or postmodern. Yet there is little here that George Orwell did not capture seven decades ago in his notion of "doublethink". In its philosophy, post-truth restores precisely the fascist attitude to truth – and that is why nothing in our own world would startle Klemperer or Ionesco.

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. And now, as then, many confused faith in a hugely flawed leader with the truth about the world we all share.

Post-truth is pre-fascism.

*end*