

Alternative facts in Bonhoeffer's Germany

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In 1943 Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes a brief letter on New Years Day entitled *After Ten years*. Within that letter he offers a poignant reflection on the human proclivity to accept a lie (*Folly*) not based on its empirical worth or moral standing, but simply because the lie appeases personal prejudices and gives the pathology validity in public discourse. Although at first glance it appears that Bonhoeffer offers a roundabout reflection on the idea of *folly*, what Bonhoeffer renders posthumously is an archetypal reflection on our current political discourse commonly known as the *post-truth* era and also a critique on his context that is shaped by *der Kampf*.

Bonhoeffer is speaking to his social context, which is shaped by Nazi propaganda, however, what he interrogates in *Of Folly* parallels our current sociopolitical discourse labeled as *post-truth* or what has been recently labeled as *alternative facts*.

Bonhoeffer is rarely explicit about the sociopolitical context that informs his various perspectives and we are left to wonder how much of his social context is informing his theology, however, by this time in Bonhoeffer's life we can reasonably suggest that his thinking was clearly informed by his sociopolitical environment (one may also argue that his earlier thinking on the Sermon on the Mount was informed by his context but now it's not just for the sake of academia or bolstering *Volk* ideology) more persistently than it was prior to *Letters and Papers from Prison*. In fact the ideology that is the impetus for the policy that *justifies* Bonhoeffer's imprisonment lends itself to folly. The social conditions in which Bonhoeffer is situated is birthed out of the folly of *Volk Weltanschauung* which promotes the idea that the imperial

man-the ideal human is of Aryan descent and any human being not a part of this racial origin was a threat to their existence.

Post-truth is described as that which relates to or denotes circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief (*Oxford English Dictionary*). It is a phrase first coined by Ralph Keyes in his book *The Post-Truth Era*. Post-truth are not just little white lies but are constructed with the aim of shaping public opinion. It first requires an antithesis to a particular idea or person(s). After World War I, Jewish people became the object of German scorn. Their sinking economy and global embarrassment gave away to feelings of shame, but also inadequacy, as Jews were perceived to be progressing further than their native *Deutsch* brethren(similar to the fear many people have today of minorities progressing more than mainstream America). Hitler and his Nazi regime were able to exploit this feeling of collective loss and ethnic embarrassment by promoting a trope of *der Kampf* usually translated as the *struggle* or *battle* (*War and The Media*, 128). On one level there was a socioeconomic struggle that destroyed Germany's economy, largely due to the *Great Depression*. On the other level there was a transcendent metanarrative attached to *der Kampf*, where struggle operated as law of nature. This law not only promoted the competition for existence, but also treated the natural world as a site where humans could assist nature by improving their ability to resist any forces that threatened their survival. The *der Kampf* gave the metanarrative needed to articulate the vision of the German Reich and as a result they promulgated an imagined Jew as an obstacle to be conquered and the existential threat to their existence (*Selling Hitler*, pg. 5).

Nazi Germany was able to play off the collective anxiety of struggling Germans by giving them a rallying cry (*der Kampf*) and a perceived enemy (the Jew). The idea of *der Kampf* was then forcefully imported into the Volk conscious by ensuring that Volk *Weltanschauung* was promoted in various mediums such as the widest circulated national newspaper - *Volkischer Beobachter*. Newspapers, books, and journals were combed through to ensure the idea of *der Kampf* was promoted in every form of media content (*War and the Media*, 127). This sort of framing established the grounds in what was deemed logically allowable or reasonable in German civil discourse, which why Bonhoeffer could say not even facts can alter the thinking of the *fool*. In a post-truth age this is why birther movements that question the former president's citizenship can gain discursive capital, not because it holds merit, but simply because the dominant group experiences a deep sense of loss

based on a false assumption that the minority group is making progress. Birther movements and other violent ideologies seek to establish ways in which we measure which humans are valuable and which humans are not. This is why Bonhoeffer can say that the fool must be handled with care, because they hold a dangerous *Weltanschauung* (Letters and Papers from Prison, 8).

The evil person, according to Bonhoeffer is easily to expose because they carry the seeds of their own destruction. What Bonhoeffer is saying is that once evil is exposed for what it is, not even evil men want to lay claim to it, however, the fool will lay hold to folly because folly can become normalized. *Der Kampf* was the normalization of folly where the *fool* (The German Nationalist) gets to determine who and what is valued. The unbreakable ideologies that the *fool* holds are not created autonomously out of his or her own reasoning, but are framed interdependently between the *fool* and the Nation State; the Nation State needs the *fools* anxiety, rather legitimate or illegitimate and the *fool* needs and relies on the Nation State's hegemony to forcefully import these ideas to give his anxiety credence and his violence justified. Bonhoeffer writes: *The fact that the fool is often stubborn must not mislead us into thinking that he is independent. One feels in fact, when talking to him, that one is dealing not with the man himself, but with slogans, catchwords, which have taken hold of him.... Having thus become a passive instrument, the fool will be capable of any evil at the same time incapable of seeing that it is evil. Here lies the danger of a diabolical exploitation that can do irreparable damage to human beings* (Letters and Papers from Prison, 9). The fool becomes a mediator of evil but really believes he is actually doing good.

Bonhoeffer's fool describes the creation of demagogues that are imprisoned by their nationalistic allegiances and as a result truth moves on the axis of believability rather than on empirical evidence. And what is deemed believable is measured by if the idea or concept assuages my prejudice and anxiety.

This is why slogans such as *Make American Great* again can spark hegemonic revival in post-truth America because it exploits feelings of loss, which are rooted in a false deception of White inferiority. *Make American Great* again is the modern day trope similar to *der Kampf* because it carries the question, "*who stole America's greatness*", it creates a battle or struggle for those who *believe that they are White*. The idea of whiteness is folly itself promulgated by fools who are incapable of seeing evil as he carries out evil. The same folly that created the conditions in Bonhoeffer's Germany is the same folly that has sparked a hegemonic revival in Trump's America.