

Buzz Can Happen Here: Sinclair Lewis and the New American Fascism

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The exquisitely named Berzelius Windrip, known to all as “Buzz,” is the fictional politician and “Ringmaster Revolutionist” who ousts FDR from the Democratic ticket in 1936 and gets himself elected dictator in Sinclair Lewis’s speculative novel *It Can’t Happen Here*. No uniformed buffoon like Italy’s Il Duce, nor an awkward, vegetarian mystic like Adolf Hitler, President Buzz Windrip is a decidedly American kind of fascist.

Published in October 1935, in the sixth year of the Great Depression, *It Can’t Happen Here* was a major literary and political event. Not only was Sinclair Lewis famous for being the first American to win a Nobel Prize, in 1930, but this novel gave both name and narrative to Americans’ growing fears of whatever “It” was. Critics praised the book, written over the course of one summer, for its journalistic immediacy, and Lewis was so committed to capturing this sense of urgency that he insisted on changing the text at the printers after the September 10th assassination of Senator Huey Long.

After Hollywood spiked a film version (a decision made by the conservative head of MGM studios at the request of the German foreign office), Lewis wrote a play for the Federal Theater Project. On October 27, 1936, 21 companies in 18 cities debuted local productions of *It Can’t Happen Here*. “Out in Denver” reported the *New York Times*, “dictatorship came to a small Colorado town, and in Detroit it captured the factory district.” Companies performed in Yiddish in New York City, Spanish in Tampa, and an all-black cast focused on racial issues in Seattle.

The first printing sold over 94,000 copies and some 380,000 saw the play over the course of a four-month run. The work proved so successful that the title quickly became part of the political lexicon of New Deal America, feeding a liberal-democratic confidence that American democracy could survive the Great Depression. Yet Lewis complained his novel was more celebrated than actually read, something he lamented because his title is far too ambiguous to be used as a slogan. On the one hand, the title appears in the book as a feeble denial based on American Exceptionalism in the present tense (*It can’t happen HERE*). And

on the other hand, reflective of the overall experience reading the book, the title is an anguished plea for future awareness and action (*It CAN'T happen here*). Nevertheless, as a work of political fiction, Lewis's novel helped awaken Americans to a rising threat, which seemed to reveal itself among Washington politicians, media celebrities, and small-town Rotary Clubs alike. And though the novel fails as a work of prophecy (FDR was re-elected three more times and led the country into a victorious, anti-fascist war), *It Can't Happen Here* remains the most celebrated exploration of fascism in American letters.

Eighty years later, "It" is again on Americans' lips. When Lewis describes his fictional dictator as having "an enormous head, a bloodhound head, of huge ears, pendulous cheeks, mournful eyes," it's not hard to imagine similarities between Buzz and the professional egomaniac turned nonfictional politician, Donald J. Trump. So readers may ask: Is Donald a latter-day Buzz? Is Trump's presidential run what "It" looks like in 2016?

Times have changed since the 1930s, and while history does not repeat itself, it does, to borrow from Twain, occasionally rhyme. Americans of the center-left today, just as in the 1930s, are struggling to comprehend the meaning of an insurgent far right, and looking for meaningful ways to represent and resist this growing threat. If Lewis's creation of Buzz Windrip helped to imagine an American fascism in the Great Depression, what can re-reading this novel now tell us about the current crisis of democracy? Can political fictions and fictional politicians still help us understand what is at stake in a moment like this, where American readers, voters, and citizens once again question if "It" can happen here?

The "It" in question is of course fascism, and Lewis was not the first to speculate about its meaning for Americans. In September 1934, a year before the publication of Lewis's novel, *The Modern Monthly* published a symposium of left-wing intellectuals on the question: "Will Fascism Come to America?" It had been eighteen months since Adolf Hitler's appointment as Chancellor of Germany, and fifteen since he'd seized dictatorial powers and opened the country's first concentration camp at Dachau. Just a month earlier, Dorothy Thompson, the "first lady of American journalism" and Lewis's second wife, became the first foreign journalist to be expelled from the new Reich. Talk of fascism filled the New York City apartment shared by the writing couple. Thompson opened their home to a growing community of European exiles, and Lewis, when he was not drinking, turned his imagination to the threat posed by an American fascism.

First championed by Benito Mussolini in Italy during the 1920s, fascism is as difficult to define as it is attractive to abuse. Pundits debated this question in the 1930s just as historians disagree on its definition today. In general, fascism represents a politics of racialized nationalism and anti-democratic authori-

tarianism. It is a far-right-wing expression of race and nation, celebrating the centrality of racial supremacy and aggressive war for the restoration of national greatness. Fascism was born in the early twentieth century out of the catastrophe of the First World War, the challenge posed by Soviet Communism, and the economic ruin of the Depression, emerging in its now classical form as a mass social movement in the 1920s and 30s where its adherents seized power in Italy, Spain, and Germany. Today, Americans recognize fascism only by its most extreme example, namely Nazism. This is because Americans believe that “the Greatest Generation” fought and won “the Good War” to cast fascism into the dustbin of history. However, the uncomfortable truth remains that fascist movements appeared in every capitalist nation during the Great Depression, including in the United States.

The Modern Monthly writers all agreed that a fascist movement was a real possibility in the U.S. That is, if it was not already with us as the Ku Klux Klan, the anti-Semitism of Henry Ford, and in the memories of old radicals crushed by World War I and the Red Scare. “It is not to be denied,” wrote Stuart Chase, “that millions of Americans would find their hormones stimulated by fascism.” The cynical old historian Charles Beard warns “the tinder is here for the flame.” All agree that American fascism will not arrive goose-stepping behind a Volkswagen, but will be “draped in the stars and stripes,” claiming to be “distinctively American.”

Lewis offers his own analysis, combining the tools of literary realism and speculative fiction. With *It Can't Happen Here*, Lewis created a new kind of political novel, which begins firmly grounded in the present crisis before narrating the increasingly catastrophic fictional events of the next two years as a presidential election leads to a police state. In this way Lewis does not give us a conventional speculative or dystopian novel, like Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) or Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), where “the clocks were striking thirteen” and our future is the fiction's present. Such a speculative leap deliberately leaves the process of historical transformation outside of the action. Lewis's riskier formal choice—based in part on Jack London's *The Iron Heel* (1908)—is to narrate the historical process itself, bending history as text from a familiar starting point into an oppressive future. Lewis's formal choice in *It Can't Happen Here* is to reveal the process of how fascism happens and democracies die. Unfortunately, in the 1930s there were no shortage of examples at hand to demonstrate how and why a frightened people vote themselves into tyranny.

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Berzelius Windrip begins his personal path to power as a jovial, small-town lawyer turned back-slapping, arm-twisting Western Senator. For Lewis, Buzz is the

“Professional Common Man,” a speaker capable of “orgasms of oratory” and possessed of an “uncommon natural ability to be authentically excited by and with his audience.” Buzz has the political talents of the finest machine politician, skilled at pandering to all constituencies while playing the backroom game of patronage and favors.

“He drank Coca-Cola with the Methodists, beer with the Lutherans, California white wine with the Jewish village merchants—and,” writes Lewis, “when they were safe from observation, white-mule corn whisky with all of them.” Buzz’s political savvy, essential friendliness, and desire for approval is perhaps where he differs most sharply from Mr. Trump, who has absolutely no political experience and seems determined to test whether or not he can insult his way into the White House.

Lewis modeled Buzz on Senator Huey Long after the charismatic “Kingfish” of Louisiana politics bragged in an interview with Thompson that he would beat FDR for the Democratic nomination and become president in 1936.

Lewis liked Roosevelt and had no qualms about insulting Buzz, calling him “vulgar, almost illiterate, a public liar easily detected, and his ‘ideas’ almost idiotic.” Yet the familiarity bred by Lewis’s insults underscores the deeper kind of threat posed by Senator Windrip, for Buzz is merely “the mask and bellowing voice, with his satanic secretary, Lee Sarason, as the brain behind.” In other words, Buzz’s populist excesses put a pudgy, patriotic face on a revanchist plot to use democratic means to destroy democracy. This ruling class conspiracy behind the populist “Buzz” perhaps explains why the character shares the name, “Berzelius,” with a secret society at Yale, Lewis’s alma mater.

Promising high wages and low prices, proudly pro-labor and anti-strike, Buzz is ever willing to be all things to all people. After winning the endorsement of the Father Coughlin-like radio preacher, Bishop Paul Peter Prang and his League of Forgotten Men, Buzz claims the Democratic Party nomination at the convention and launches his national campaign by forming a paramilitary army of Minute Men. Because they don’t wear the same color shirts—not brown, black, red or silver in the paramilitary fashion of the day—Windrip claims “the Minute Men are not Fascist or Communist or anything at all but plain Democratic—the shock troops of Freedom!”

Buzz’s candidacy is otherwise utterly conventional in form and yet hilariously exaggerated in style. Consider the campaign anthem, sung to the tune of “Yankee Doodle Dandy”:

Buzz and buzz and keep it up,
Our cares and needs he’s toting,
You are a most ungrateful pup,
Unless for Buzz you’re voting!

Every M.M. gets a whip
To use upon some traitor,
And every Antibuzz we skip
Today, we'll tend to later.

Lewis gives us passages from Buzz's ghost-written "part biography, part economic program, and part plain exhibitionistic boasting, called *Zero Hour—Over the Top*." And from the comically precise *15 Points of Victory for the Forgotten Men*, Buzz's platform that, among other things, promises to give every American \$5000 a year, to ban Jews from public life, to totally disenfranchise black people, to force women out of the workplace, to build an enormous new military, and to arrest all the Communists, Anarchists and Socialists. The final and only non-negotiable point, Point 15, is an explicit demand for dictatorship, calling for a constitutional amendment to grant the President exceptional, emergency powers "during this critical epoch."

"God knows there's been enough indication that we can have tyranny in America," protests Doremus Jessup, the very Bernie Sanders-like small-town Vermont newspaper editor who is the novel's main character, "but wait till Windrip show us how to say it with machine guns! . . . A real Fascist dictatorship!" Such dire predictions on the eve of the election earn Jessup the titular rebuttal from one of his old friends: "That couldn't happen here in America, not possibly! We're a country of freemen!" To which Jessup grunts back: "The hell it can't!"

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When Dorothy Thompson first interviewed Hitler in 1931, she immediately realized "the startling insignificance of this man who has set the world agog." Instead of "meeting the future dictator of Germany" she found herself confronting what she described as "the very prototype of the Little Man." This description left a deep impression on American readers, and there is little doubt that Lewis's novel was inspired by Thompson. Even if Buzz is no Hitler, he draws upon the violent resentment of the American "little man" to seize power:

I am addressing my own boys, the Minute Men, everywhere in America!
To you and you only I look for help to make America a proud, rich land
again . . . They said you were no good, because you were poor. I tell you
that you are, ever since yesterday noon, the highest lords of the land—the
aristocracy—the makers of the new America of freedom and justice. Boys!
I need you! Help me—help me to help you! Stand fast! Anybody tries to
block you—give the swine the point of your bayonet!

Buzz suspends Congress and the Supreme Court, orders “protective custody” for all enemies in newly built prison camps, bans all other political parties, and inaugurates the American Corporate State and Patriotic Party, also known as the Corpus. At this moment, President Windrip gains his honorific title of *the Chief*, “meaning Führer, or Imperial Wizard of the K.K.K., or Il Duce,” writes Lewis, “or Imperial Potentate of the Mystic Shrine, or Commodore, or University Coach, or anything else supremely noble and good-hearted.”

It is worth noting how Lewis bends this line from the violent titles of a global fascist movement into the local honorifics of the civic-minded American middle class. This act of domesticating fascism reflects both the satirical style of the novel as well as its larger formal structure. The novel is written in a kind of federalist literary form where Lewis gives us the national storyline of Buzz and the birth of the Corpo party (which many read as a translated German import), which is closely interwoven with the Corpo seizure of power in Fort Beulah, Vermont.

Lewis locates the seeds of American fascism in the same small-town, white, protestant provincialism that he made his literary reputation satirizing. To a surprising degree, *It Can't Happen Here* offers a dark revisit to Lewis's popular novels of the 1920s, only his familiar middle American characters have become weaponized by the Depression. So we find ourselves on *Main Street* with concentration camps, in *Babbitt* with bayonets, *Elmer Gantry* with a paramilitary; and when the equivalent of *Arrowsmith* the physician speaks his scientific truth to power in this novel he is dragged out back and shot. Or, as Doremus Jessup says: “This is Revolution in terms of Rotary.”

Indeed, Lewis opens his novel at “a most respectable gathering” of the Fort Beulah Rotary Club as it is addressed by an antifeminist and a militarist that could easily be mistaken for Sarah Palin and Dick Cheney. This reveals the darkest element in Lewis's nightmare; that historical folktales of American exceptionalism and the inherent virtue of the “real America” do not protect us from tyranny because such fantasies are the very resource most easily exploited by fascism.

As a self-described “mild, rather indolent and somewhat sentimental Liberal,” Jessup may have recognized the threat of Buzz, but he and his kind prove unable to resist him. Jessup learns his lesson the hard way after he is arrested and tortured in a concentration camp in rural Vermont that is clearly based on Dachau. “But he saw too,” writes Lewis, “that in America the struggle was fogged by the fact that the worst Fascists were they who disowned the word ‘Fascism’ and preached enslavement to Capitalism under the style of Constitutional and Traditional Native American Liberty . . . To their purpose they could quote not only Scripture but Jefferson.” In other words, Americans had no need to imitate Hitler or Mussolini, especially when the record of nativism, provin-

cialism, and violence that shaped the 1920s was more than enough to establish a patriotic version of Christian fascism. Fascism is not coming for America, it has always already been here.

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This conclusion may just be dark enough to speak to our own cynical moment. For while a classical, Windrip-style fascism failed to come to power in the 1930s, it was not for lack of trying. Lewis's novel helps remind us that the white supremacy, toxic masculinity, religious bigotry, and violent authoritarianism that define fascism are also seemingly permanent features of American politics. These features have been persistently pushed to the margins of our politics since they last led the world into the Second World War.

Today, amidst the Koch-style corruption of government, the corporate co-optation of American liberalism, and a persistent debt- and austerity-driven economic crisis, we face the revivification of these fascist values in the form of a Trump candidacy. And so we need Lewis's historical and literary warning now more than ever. But is the literary fiction of the present up to the task?

The proletarian and radical literary traditions of the Cultural Front in the 1930s and 40s represent the highwater mark of American political fiction with novels like John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, Richard Wright's *Native Son*, Tillie Olson's *Tell Me A Riddle*, and Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*. After the repression of the early Cold War era, this sense of crisis and radical possibility returned to fiction with a new political ethos fostered by the Civil Rights Movement, the Counterculture, and Second Wave Feminism. This new literature strenuously blurred the lines of what constitutes "the political" for an era defined by the slogan "the personal is political." Novels like James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*, Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, Ursula LeGuin's *The Dispossessed*, Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* are all political, even at times polemical novels, but within a political landscape no longer exclusively defined by parties, elections, and presidents.

Strangely, if serious fiction has largely left formal politics behind, the "young-adult fiction" market is saturated with dystopian politics. Consider the role of President Snow in *The Hunger Games* who uses teenage blood sports to control a tyrannically unequal society. Or consider fascism as it's presented in the Harry Potter series, where Voldemort's anti-muggle racism and authoritarian ruthlessness easily defeats the cowardly liberalism of the Ministry of Magic, leaving only Harry, Hermione, and their band of multi-cultural millennials to save humanity in a secret war.

At the same time that American literature seems to have withdrawn from formal politics, the popular desire for fictional politics has been filled by film

and television. The 1960s and 70s offered renewed consideration of formal politics as paranoid spectacle in films like *The Manchurian Candidate*, *Wild in the Streets*, *A Clockwork Orange*, *The Candidate*, and *The Parallax View*. Of course, in the 1980s we had our first professional actor turned president, a man seemingly incapable of telling the difference between his own biography and his old movie rolls, or indeed the difference between the reality of war and his favorite films like *Rambo*, *Top Gun*, and *Star Wars*. If fiction became political in the 1960s, Reagan responded by turning politics fictional in the 1980s.

Today, television provides the nation with its most compelling political narratives. Shows like *The Wire*, *House of Cards*, *Scandal*, *The Good Wife*, *Veep*, and yes, *Game of Thrones*, all carry on this work of fictionalizing politics, if in a decidedly pessimistic and non-polemical direction. I have no doubt that the majority of viewers of *The West Wing* were depressed Democrats taking refuge in the TV fantasy of a competent liberal White House during the dark days of George W. Bush. Here political fiction offered a kind of polemical escapism rather than critical engagement. In the same way, TV is much to blame for our current crisis of democracy, enabling Donald Trump to emerge out of “Reality TV” programming and Twitter trolling to seize control of the three-headed Cerberus of the 24-hour news channels and push the nation toward the fascist cliff.

Perhaps, then, it’s not fiction we need to look to when seeking to confront the political crisis of our own moment. Now is when we need to look to history. And maybe this is why re-reading Sinclair Lewis in 2016 seems so necessary. Because we read *It Can’t Happen Here* as a “classic” of American political fiction, it forces us to look beyond the literary and to explore the historical context, the very same story of how democracies die that Lewis and Thompson witnessed. Trump only wants to make America great again by purging the nation of its criminal foreigners, exiling its religious deviants, bringing back torture and reprisal killings, and by jailing his political opposition. If these parallels to the classical fascist regimes of the 1930s seem extreme it’s because they are, and the reality of Trump seems to have pushed the nation beyond the power of fiction. If a 21st century Lewis proposed a fictional candidate with a \$60,000 surgically implanted wig and three wives that invited our most powerful enemy to organize cyberattacks against us before insulting the grieving mother of a slain war hero, no one would believe him.

Lewis reminds us that democracies can and do fail, that the survival of “government by the people” is not guaranteed by anything less than the commitments and compromises of those very same people. We need to recognize that while Donald Trump is not Buzz Windrip, fascism can always put on a new face and that “it” can still happen here.