

Antifa as Bogeyman

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Many regard President Donald Trump as a master of whipping up fear to support his political agenda (e.g., Ball 2016). Perhaps like no other president, Trump creates scapegoats and bogeymen to shift direction from his own faults and failings, to ignite his base of supporters, and to garner approval for repressive policies and practices. We've seen the president do this with immigrants, spewing and tweeting that they are all criminals who will take Americans' jobs and soak our social services (e.g., Finley and Esposito 2020). His latest foil, amidst the protests by Black Lives Matter related to the murder of George Floyd and many other Black men, is Antifa.

Trump has said "our nation has been gripped by professional anarchists, looters, criminals, antifa and others." The President has repeatedly vowed to officially label Antifa a terrorist group, putting it on a federal list alongside al-Qaeda and ISIS. This is impossible, as the federal government can only classify foreign groups as terrorist entities and anti-fascism is an ideology, movement, and tactic, not an organization (Feuer 2020). Further, none of Trump's rhetoric matches reality. Instead, Antifa is a "trumped-up boogeyman for the conservative movement, a totem used to justify their violent 'law and order' approach to legitimate demonstrations demanding racial justice" (Beauchamp 2020). Antifa has been found to have very limited involvement in any of the protests of 2020 (Collins 2020). At the same time they denounce Antifa, Trump and his supporters have been largely silent on violence by far-right groups, especially pertaining to white supremacists (Haltiwanger 2020).

In reality, Antifa “is not a unified organization, but rather a loose ideological label for a subset of left-wing radicals who believe in using street-level force to prevent the rise of what they see as fascist movements. It is a kind of anarchist alternative to the police that [although traceable to Europe] took root in America’s punk scene, without any kind of national command and control structure” (Beauchamp 2020). Fear of these far-left agitators using “Antifa” tactics and infiltrating otherwise peaceful protests has also been used to justify the deployment of federal agents to various, mostly democratic-run cities, that the Trump administration claims have been “taken over” by Antifa and are now cesspools of crime and violence. In fact, on June 14, 2020, Trump tweeted “Interesting how ANTIFA and other far-left militant groups can take over a city without barely a whimper from soft, Do-Nothing Democratic leadership” (Trump Tweet Archive). This same anti-Antifa rhetoric has also encouraged ultra-repressive tactics, including violently suppressing protestors and even whisking people away in unmarked cars without probable cause. In short, Antifa appears to be the latest iteration of a bogeyman that is being employed to criminalize social and political dissent in the United States.

This paper examines the creation of Antifa, framing it within the history of anti-leftist scapegoating. It then examines the claims made about Antifa’s propensity for violence and its alleged denial of free speech. Further, the paper exposes how President Donald Trump and his supporters have made Antifa a bogeyman and the effect this has had and will likely have on political and social policy and, in particular, its impact on the 2020 presidential election.

Brief History of Antifa and Leftist Scapegoating

In his book *Antifa: The Anti-Fascist Handbook*, historian Mark Bray (2017, p. xv) explains that “depending on local contexts and politics, Antifa can variously be described as a kind of ideology, an identity, a tendency or milieu, or an activity of self-defense” In its most basic sense, those who associate with the term “Antifa” oppose fascism. Although fascism is politically thought of as a type of far-right, authoritarian ultra-nationalism characterized by dictatorial power, in a broader sense fascism also entails a system, ideology, and/or organized social/political activity in which some groups oppress, dehumanize, or marginalize other groups of people. Currently, Antifa groups in The United States and elsewhere are committed to actively opposing—both through non-violent and direct action tactics—any individual, group, or organization that, in one way or another, promotes racism, sexism, xenophobia, homophobia and other systems of oppression.

The origins of Antifa are found in European leftist organizations during the 1920s and 1930s, notably the “Arditi del Popolo” (“the People’s Daring Ones”) in Italy, and the Antifaschistische Aktion (or “anti-fascist action”) in Germany, both of which were militant anti-fascist groups. Early anti-fascist initiatives are also found in England, such as in the Battle of Cable Street, when, on October 4, 1936, tens of thousands of socialist, communist, anarchist, and Jewish groups organized to prevent the British Union of Fascists from marching through their East End London neighborhood, beating back three thousand fascist black shirts and six thousand police officers (Penny 2017). With the defeat of Mussolini and Hitler by the Allied armies, fascism came to be widely understood as synonymous with “evil”—i.e., as something any moral individual would oppose. According to Bray, this moral, individualistic interpretation of fascism during the post-World War II era, particularly in the West, discounted the need for political organizing against far-right politics (Bray 2017). Yet various groups, particularly members of marginalized communities, understood the need to actively confront fascism whenever and wherever it reared its head, as they believed that ignoring far-right ideologies and political organizing, however insignificant they might seem at any specific time, could lead to a potential fascistic metastasis and a repetition of Auschwitz and Treblinka.

By the 1960s, anti-immigrant sentiment in several Western countries once again revitalized anti-fascist energies that sought to challenge xenophobia and white supremacy. In England, for example, increased immigration during the late 1960s led to an anti-immigrant backlash that targeted South Asian communities and bolstered racist organizations such as the National Front, the Racial Preservation Society, and other far-right groups (Bray 2017, pp. 45-47). The emergence of these groups became a “wake up call for the anti-fascist movement,” which, by the 1970s, was comprised of anti-racists, socialists, anarchists, feminists, gays and lesbians, and others championing the plight of immigrants and other marginalized communities. Similarly, in Germany, a resurgence of neo-Nazism during the 1980s re-energized anti-fascist groups that emphasized militant self-defense against racists. Many of these anti-fascist groups dressed in black to ensure anonymity—a strategy also known as “black bloc”—which is today common among anti-fascist activists in various countries (Van Deusen 2002).

Interestingly, these anti-fascist efforts occurred amid the explosion of punk rock music across Britain, which later spread to other Western countries, notably the United States. According to various accounts, the modern North American Antifa movement developed to defend the punk scene from the neo-Nazi

Movement (Thomson 2017). Particularly during the 1980s and early 1990s, as neo-Nazis in the United States became more prevalent in the hardcore punk scene, they were increasingly confronted by anti-racist skinheads who drew from European anti-fascist groups and exercised a politics of self-defense as a way to protect not only the underground/punk music scene but vulnerable communities from what they perceived as a neo-Nazi threat (Bray 2017). Various groups broadly associated with Antifa in the United States today were also active in other organized protests, including the so-called “Battle for Seattle” 1999, in which activists, through direct action tactics, managed to disrupt the World Trade Organization ministerial conference in Seattle, Washington.

The presidential candidacy and election of Donald J. Trump represents another historical landmark in the formation of Antifa in the United States. As has been well documented, Trump’s presidency emboldened white nationalists associated with the so-called alt-right, who call for, among other things, a “White ethno-state” in the United States (Hawley 2017). However, similar to what happened in England and Germany in the 1970s and 1980s, the increasing visibility of the alt-right in the United States from 2015-2017 revitalized Antifa groups, who organized to challenge the alt-right. The most publicized clashes between Antifa and the far-right took place at the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia on August of 2017, which involved physical confrontations and the death of anti-racist activist, Heather Heyer. But while Antifa drew support from some quarters, they were denounced by many—both liberals and conservatives—as a fanatical fringe group that suppresses free speech and uses violent tactics to achieve its political aims.

The same accusations have been made in response to the uprisings against systemic racism and police brutality that took place in the wake of the murder of George Floyd. Here again, many have accused Antifa of hijacking Black Lives Matter and undermining their political efforts by encouraging violence, looting, damaging property, and occupying sections of entire cities, as with the creation of a so-called “autonomous zone” referred to by the acronym CHAZ in Seattle. In fact, many on the right have even argued that Antifa (along with Black Lives Matter) is actually funded and controlled by a sinister cabal of leftist elitists, including George Soros, who want to promote violence and divisions with the ultimate aim of consolidating power (Gibbons 2020). Of course, there is absolutely no evidence that any of this is true.

Far from new, the idea that radical leftists are plotting to take over the country and create havoc is an old fear within the context of recent US history. In

fact, according to various commentators, the demonization of Antifa today is a continuation of the so-called “Red Scare” of the early 20th century, and a bit later, the rise of McCarthyism in the 1950s (e.g., Gomez 2020). The first Red Scare occurred in the wake of the World War I. The triumph of the Bolshevik Russian Revolution in 1917 coincided with a rise in labor strikes and other forms of activism in the United States. Tapping into the xenophobic sentiments of the era, the media sensationalized these labor strikes as the work of “foreign communist radicals” who were determined to undermine capitalism and the American way of life. Fear of this foreign threat is at least what partly led to the passing of the Sedition Act of 1918, which criminalized criticism against the US government and led to the close monitoring of anyone who was deemed to be a threat. The implied anti-communist fervor eventually encouraged US Attorney General of the time, Mitchell Palmer, to order what came to be known as the “Palmer Raids” from late 1919 to early 1920—a series of violent raids that targeted primarily immigrants who were known to be communists or anarchists (Shepley 2011).

Similar stigmatization and repression of left-leaning activists or sympathizers continued in subsequent decades with the rise of the Cold War and the creation of the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1938 (later named the House Committee on Internal Security in 1969), a committee devoted to investigating and exposing communists and other “subversive” or “disloyal” actors in government, academia, the film industry, and other areas. As is well known, one particularly fervent anti-communist crusader, especially during the 1950s, was US Senator Joseph R. McCarthy of Wisconsin, who actively destroyed the careers and reputations of people by accusing them, often falsely, of being communists (Schreker and Deery 2017). Presupposed by all this was the idea that anyone who held leftist viewpoints was a threat to decency and democracy and thus an enemy of the United States. The implied witch-hunt was further carried out by various other government officials, targeted far more than just communists, and was even used to persecute civil rights leaders. For example, in the early 1960s, FBI director Edgar Hoover “was quick to equate any kind of protest with communist subversion, including civil rights demonstrations led by Martin Luther King, Jr. Hoover labeled King a communist and covertly worked to intimidate and discredit the civil rights leader” (Red Scare 2010). Under the counterintelligence program (COINTELPRO), which lasted until the 1970s, the FBI drew from “techniques of warfare” that were designed to surveil, infiltrate, discredit, and disrupt hostile foreign agents and applied them to domestic political movements that threatened the existing social and political order (Gibbons 2020b). When one considers this history, parallels to how Antifa is currently being demonized by members of the

current Trump administration to intimidate protestors and discredit legitimate popular anger and calls for social and racial justice are difficult to ignore.

Controversy over Free Speech and Aims of Antifa

Important to note is that Antifa is predicated on an illiberal worldview, which is partly why this movement is often misunderstood, particularly in the United States. From an Antifa perspective, respecting free speech is secondary to the need for unapologetically fighting, de-platforming, silencing, and stopping Nazis and other far-right actors who seek to hurt, discriminate, or dehumanize others. As stated by Mark Bray (2017, p. xiv), “at the heart of the anti-fascist outlook is a rejection of the classical liberal phrase incorrectly ascribed to Voltaire that I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.”

Sensitive to past historical atrocities, contemporary Antifa groups are firmly convinced that unless racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia, and other systems of oppression are immediately confronted whenever and wherever they occur, they quickly spread, thereby putting vulnerable communities at risk. As such, Antifa not only physically confronts and attempts to silence Nazis, white supremacists, and others they deem to be a threat—a tactic Bray (2017) describes as “anticipatory self-defense”—but also uses nonviolent tactics against their political opponents, such as gathering information about them and releasing it to the public (a practice known as “doxing”) so as to make them unemployable, ensure they feel unsafe, and turn them into social pariahs. Not surprisingly, these tactics have been accused by both conservatives and many liberals of being authoritarian and undemocratic. In fact, when Antifa groups in the United States organized to prevent white nationalist Richard Spencer, or controversial right wing provocateurs like Anne Coulter and Milo Yiannopoulos from speaking on college campuses, they were denounced by many as politically correct fanatics carrying out the modern equivalent of book burnings.

But is Antifa really an enemy of “free speech”? According to Bray (2017, pp. 144-149), the answer is more complicated than what it is often made out to be. We will focus here on four points. First, the charge that Antifa is antithetical to free speech assumes some type of free speech absolutism or “neutrality” that simply does not exist in the US, as the US government already restricts things like false advertisement, television commercials for tobacco, libel, various forms of pornography, and other issues. Within the private realm, free speech is also often restricted, as when corporate employees (similar to government officials in the public realm) are frequently prohibited from sharing privileged company

information by having to sign nondisclosure clauses in their employment contracts. Second, when popular movements have posed an actual threat to the status quo, the state has often suppressed or distorted their messages, as in the case with anti-neoliberal globalization protests in the 1990s, the anti-war movement in the early 2000s, Occupy Wall Street in 2011, and, more recently, Black Lives Matter and their call to defund the police. In the latter example, BLM activists—most of whom have not called to completely eliminate the police but rather to invest in communities and reallocate crime control funding to more comprehensive emergency/public safety response teams that might include mental health specialists, social workers, and others— have been accused by the Trump administration and others of wanting to do away completely with law enforcement, thereby giving criminals a green light to victimize with impunity. Third, assuming some sort of free speech “neutrality” also ignores how the state effectively silences groups like prisoners and undocumented immigrants, many of whom have very little legal recourse to defend their rights. And fourth, “free speech,” as conceptualized in the United States, is essentially a market driven notion which relies on an idealized “marketplace of ideas” to ensure that the better argument wins out. This, however, ignores how far from a free flow of ideas, multinational corporations have enormous control over capital and information, and therefore shape public opinion and people’s conception of reality. When one considers these issues, the argument can be made that while Antifa does not prioritize some idealized conception of free speech over confronting fascism, these activists are passionate about ensuring that the concerns and voices of marginalized communities are heard. In this sense, Antifa might actually be regarded as a promoter of free speech, particularly for those who are too often stripped of a voice.

For a concise statement addressing the central aims of Antifa, one can look at The TORCH Network’s website (Torchantifa.org). The TORCH Network is the successor of the Anti-Racist Action Network and currently the biggest and best known Antifa network in the United States. In their website, TORCH list “Five Points of Unity” defining their network (emphasis in the original):

1. **We disrupt fascist and far right organizing and activity.**
2. **We don’t rely on the cops or courts to do our work for us.** This doesn’t mean we never go to court, but the cops uphold white supremacy and the status quo. They attack us and everyone who resists oppression. We must rely on ourselves to protect ourselves and stop the fascists.
3. **We oppose all forms of oppression and exploitation.** We intend to do

the hard work necessary to build a broad, strong movement of oppressed people centered on the working class against racism, sexism, nativism, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, homophobia, transphobia, and discrimination against the disabled, the oldest, the youngest, and the most oppressed people. We support abortion rights and reproductive freedom. We want a classless, free society. We intend to win!

4. We hold ourselves accountable personally and collectively to live up to our ideals and values.

5. We not only support each other within the network, but we also support people outside the network who we believe have similar aims or principles. An attack on one is an attack on all! (Torch Network, Points of Unity).

Of course, the historical nuances and social-political implications of these aims are typically ignored by those who demonized Antifa as a bunch of fringe radicals hell bent on destroying America. Indeed, research into the Trump administration's understanding of Antifa has found that it includes little more than Google searches (Devereaux 2020b).

Trump and His Supporters' Use of Antifa as Bogeyman

Trump and his supporters have been demonizing Antifa for years. In summer of 2017, Trump denounced Antifa for perpetrating violence at the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, despite the real culprits being far-right white supremacists. He even said the "alt-left," meaning Antifa, came charging the "alt-right" (Mark and Perrett 2020). Antifa/anarchists were said to be infiltrating Trump and ICE's attempts to separate families from their children and were allegedly planning violent attacks that never happened. In May 2019, the FBI circulated a report titled "Anarchist Extremists Very Likely Increasing Targeting of US Government Entities in Arizona, Increasing Risk of Armed Conflict. It was later leaked to several media sources. Despite its provocative title, almost all the evidence cited in it involved nonviolent protest. (Devereaux 2020a).

The emphasis on Antifa as a violent group intent on destroying America has escalated since the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent Black Lives Matter protests. When 75-year-old protester Martin Cugino was pushed down by two police officers in Buffalo, Trump tweeted that Cugino might be an antifa "agitator," despite no evidence to support that claim (Collins 2020). These claims seem to have

been based on a report from *One America News Network*, a Right-wing cable TV station, which has since the 2016 election been a cheerleader for Trump.

Trump's cronies have advanced his antifa bogeyman agenda. Testifying before the House Judiciary Committee on July 28, 2020, Attorney General William Barr stated, incorrectly, that "Antifa is heavily represented in the recent riots." In fact, in the wake of nationwide uprisings against racism and police violence, Barr dismissed the idea that there is systemic racism in law enforcement, called for the creation of a new taskforce on "violent anti-government extremism," and suggested recent protests and uprisings demanding racial justice are controlled and organized by "outside agitators and radicals [who] are exploiting the situation...[and] in many places it appears the violence is planned, organized, and driven by anarchic and left extremist groups, far-left extremist groups using Antifa-like tactics" (quoted in Wu 2020). The Trump "Make America Great Again" committee, an official fundraising arm for the president, ran campaign ads telling donors to contribute to the administration's anti-Antifa campaign. On June 4, the FBI released a report about the protests and while it noted the possibility of violence on both political sides, Antifa was the only group specifically mentioned (Devereaux 2020b).

On June 5 in an op ed published by *Fox News*, Ken Cuccinelli, acting deputy secretary of DHS, tweeted, "Their silence is deafening. Cities across America burn at the hands of antifa and anarchists while many political leaders are refusing to call it what it is: domestic terrorism." On July 4, Trump reiterated his approach to the protests at an address honoring the U.S. military, "We are now in the process of defeating the radical left, the Marxists, the anarchists, the agitators, the looters, and people who in many instances have absolutely no clue what they are doing" (Devereaux 2020b).

The claim that Antifa is somehow leading the protests about Black Lives Matter or that it is spearheading violence is nothing more than a way to delegitimize the protests. It is intended to detract from the fact that, globally, the Black Lives Matter protests were in all likelihood the world's largest nonviolent gatherings. In fact, a report in *The Guardian* found that leftwing violence has resulted in far fewer deaths than has rightwing violence, and that leftwing Antifa activists have not been linked to a single murder in over a decade. It examined nearly 900 incidents since 1994 and found just one attack staged by an anti-fascist activist and the only fatality was the perpetrator (Devereaux 2020b).

The President and his supporters' rhetoric about anti-fascist violence is clearly aimed at his base and sends a message that it is acceptable to attack people who protest. Yvette Felarca, a California-based organizer and anti-fascist activist, explained, "It's his way of saying to his supporters: 'Yeah, go after them. Beat them or kill them to the point where they go back home and stay home afraid'" (Beckett 2020). In fact, leaked law enforcement documents show that police knew that it was rightwing infiltrators, not Antifa or other activists, who were planning on attacking protestors. The documents, which were published online at "Blueleaks," expressed concern about violence encounters with the far-right "boogaloo" movement, which seeks to attack police in order to instigate a civil war. Hina Shamsi, director of the ACLU's National Security Project, explained, "There are instances in which people engaging in white supremacist violence get the benefit of the doubt as potential lone offenders, while people of color and those who dissent against government injustice are smeared as threats with guilt by association." Michael German, a former FBI agent who specialized in domestic terrorism, decried the politicization of these threats and asserted that painting both sides of the political spectrum as equally dangerous is disingenuous when only the right is actively killing people. In many states, the overblown threat of Antifa has led the FBI to target individuals who may be involved or sympathetic and to try to get them to become informants (Devereaux 2020b).

Two days before Trump tweeted about classifying Antifa as a terrorist organization, leaked documents show that his own Department of Homeland Security analysts had identified an encrypted message in which followers were encouraged to use Molotov cocktails and firearms against police. This group calling itself the National Accelerationist Revival wrote "Looting and shoplifting are both cool and whites should be doing it way more," the source went on. "When the laws no longer benefit you, break them for personal gain. If you don't feel like buying something, steal it. If you don't feel like driving slow, drive fast. If you don't like someone, hurt them." In another document issued the following day, DHS warned of the white supremacist boogaloos who were planning attacks on law enforcement. These concerns came to fruition, in particular with the attack by former Air Force sergeant Steven Carillo, Carillo assassinated a federal court security guard in Oakland and then ambushed and killed a sheriff's deputy and wounded many others while wearing a boogaloo patch and scrawling the movement's phrases on the hood of a vehicle in his own blood. Carillo had previously made comments in a Facebook group about how the protests provided the ideal opportunity to attack police. Yet while Carillo was on the run, the FBI in Minneapolis was circulating an uncorroborated and unsubstantiated online discussion that Antifa intended to massacre the national guard at the state's capitol. That same day, Trump tweeted a quote from "Fox and Friends" host

Brian Kilmeade about the Carillo incident, “I don’t see any indication that there were any white supremacist [sic] groups mixing in. This is an ANTIFA Organization. It seems that the first time we saw it in a major way was Occupy Wall Street. It’s the same mindset” and then responded to the tweet “TRUE!” Later Trump appeared in the White House rose garden vowing to mobilize military forces to quash “the violence and restore security and safety in America,” noting incorrectly that violence was being perpetrated by “professional anarchists, violent mobs ... arsonists, looters, criminals, rider rioters, Antifa, and others” and citing Carillo’s crimes as if they were committed by Antifa (Devereaux 2020b).

Immediately after Senator Kamala Harris was announced as the Democratic vice-presidential nominee, attempts to link Harris and the Biden campaign with Antifa and so called “radicals” seem to have intensified. In one Tweet, RNC Chair, Ronna McDaniel, quoted David Bossie, the president of Citizens United, who said “Make no mistake about it, if elected, this weak Democratic duo will aid and abet the radical socialists and anarchists at every turn. America must reject Joe Biden, Kamala Harris, and their dangerous ideology.” A similar warning was expressed by Vice President, Mike Pence, who, in an email, told the American people that “Joe Biden and Kamala Harris would set America on a path of SOCIALISM and DECLINE” (quoted in Krieg 2020, emphasis in the original). The attempt among Trump and his supporters to link their political rivals with Antifa took on a particularly sensational turn on August 12, 2020, when it was discovered that the domain name “antifa.com” redirects to Joe Biden’s website, giving the illusion that the Biden campaign might be in charge of Antifa itself. Although the domain bait-and-switch was likely the work of pro-Trump hackers trying to associate the Biden campaign with the far left, the supposed “controversy” became a serious topic of discussion on various social media platforms, much to the delight of Trump supporters (Binder 2020).

Conclusion: Implications of the Paranoia About Antifa

Not only is the incendiary rhetoric about Antifa taking up more FBI and law enforcement time and resources, it is resulting in public paranoia that is dangerous. In Denver, a resident reported a “suspicious” person who supposedly appeared ready to set the building on fire. He wrote, “Fairly certain he was a member of an Antifa like group,” the resident wrote, adding that there were “two Antifa safe houses on our block.” He went on to demand that law enforcement “Get these terrorists out of our city please!” The Douglas County (Colorado) Sheriff’s Department requested information about Antifa from the Colorado Information Analysis Center (CIAC). “The BlueLeaks documents suggest a borderline

obsession on the part of some law enforcement offices with painting antifa, anarchists, and left-wing dissent more broadly as a serious terrorist threat.” German, the FBI agent, explains that this paranoia effects individual officers, who believe the reports being disseminated and therefore feel as though their lives are in danger from leftist anarchists or anyone who loosely “appears” that way. Shamshi explained, “It’s law enforcement agencies engaging in unjustified discriminatory investigations and bias-based profiling, which in turn generates inaccurate or unreliable information, which is then used by other federal, state and local agencies in a variety of contexts” (Devereaux 2020b).

German went on to explain the real goal of the Trump administration’s emphasis on Antifa. “They know as well as anybody does, because they’re not stupid people, that there is no organization called antifa. It’s an absurdity what they’re talking about, but they’re using it as this umbrella term to justify militant or vigilante violence against these groups, and also police violence against these groups. They’re identifying the enemy — and that’s what’s very dangerous” (Devereaux 2020b). The campaign to demonize Antifa is fueling racial divides in the U.S, as Trump and his supporters are clearly painting protesters for racial justice as dangerous zealots who must be stopped at any cost. And, as the 2020 election approached, it is clear that Trump and his supporters are doing as they did in 2016, using hateful rhetoric, misleading and false claims, and repeated incendiary comments to ignite his base. For example, with respect to the George Floyd protests, Trump tweeted “when the looting starts the shooting starts.” Trump’s campaign ads emphasized that he’ll maintain law and order and that his opponent should be feared as a socialist who will endanger our lives, all in stark contrast to reality but playing on emotions that continue to divide. While Trump lost the election, the emphasis on keeping “suburban women safe,” “restoring law and order,” and ensuring that the United States does not become a socialist country seem to have resonated with the more than 70 million people who voted for him, revealing continued deep political divides.

The social construction of a bogeyman to manipulate public opinion and garner support from a fearful public is an old political tactic. But as Franklin Delano Roosevelt famously stated in 1933, often times what we need to fear most is fear itself. Fear, particularly when predicated on a fiction, amplifies anxiety, discourages rational thought, creates divisions, fosters anger, and invites misguided and potentially dangerous policies and practices. As discussed by Martha Nussbaum (2018), a populace cannot make rational decisions or engage in productive dialogue when operating on the basis of fear and fictitious

assumptions. Associating anti-fascism with a communist rabble hell bent on undermining democracy, freedom, and civilization is not only fictitious but impedes any possibility for productive deliberation across the political divide.

Fear and anger also make scapegoating more likely, particularly during periods of social, economic, and political volatility. Indeed, at a time when millions in the US face a deadly pandemic, major debt, unemployment, financial precarity, food insecurity, homelessness, and other social ills, people are particularly receptive to the idea of scapegoats. During such times, the practice of demonizing specific groups of people as threats to law and order, freedom, property, decency, and prosperity can only lead to misunderstanding, resentment, and potential violence. As history has shown, when people are afraid and angry, they can justify violating human rights, especially when their fear and anger is directed against a socially constructed “other” that they have been told is the enemy.

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