



# UMBERTO ECO ON DONALD TRUMP: 14 WAYS OF LOOKING AT A FASCIST

## THE LEADING REPUBLICAN PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE IS MORE MUSSOLINI THAN HITLER

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[On Facebook,] the comparisons between Donald Trump and Adolf Hitler appear like surreal dreams, with Trump's face Photoshopped so he's standing in front of a rally at Nuremberg. It doesn't take too many comments before someone invokes [Godwin's Law](#) and the conversation shuts down. Donald Trump is many things; Adolf Hitler, he is not.

On February 19th, the public intellectual, novelist, essayist, and semiotician, Umberto Eco died in Milan. While the rest of the world has mourned the loss of rock star David Bowie, Eco's death meant the loss of one of our intellectual rock stars, a man who was as comfortable discussing Barbie as he was explaining the aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas. It was Eco who insisted that a "fundamental" reading of a text—an approach espoused by Antonin Scalia, for example—was of little use when trying to understand books. "Books are not made to be believed, but to be subjected to inquiry. When we consider a book, we mustn't ask ourselves what it says but what it means." (How different Italy's intellectual giant from the man who insisted the Constitution [means exactly what it meant](#) when it was first written—by rich, white slave-owners).

I first encountered Eco as an undergraduate, in 1984, devouring *The Name of the Rose* in delicious gulps, the early modern historian I was becoming reveling in arguments about the nature of humanity, God, and if Jesus ever laughed. Eco provided William of Baskerville this zinger when discussing the latter question: "The question doesn't interest me much. I believe he never laughed. Because, omniscient as the Son of God had to be, he knew how we Christians would behave."

For Eco, **the library would never die**, because the library was as close as humanity would ever get to a divine mind. "...where the whole universe is viewed and understood at the same time." And he chided journalists who were busy predicting the "end" of the book as object, that they harbored "the last example of other fears, or of milleniaristic terrors about the end of something, the world included."

Eco was born in 1932. Mussolini had come to power in 1922, and it wasn't until Eco was 13, in 1945, that the partisans took over in Milan. It was then, when listening to the simple speech of the local partisan leader, that the young teen **understood** that "freedom of speech means freedom from rhetoric." A few words, full of meaning, meant much more than simple, declarative sentences that said nothing. Eco quickly realized that the speeches of Mussolini, which he had been forced to memorize as a schoolboy, were empty words.

Eco wrote "**Ur-Fascism**" for the *New York Review of Books* in 1995, a provocative and challenging essay about how to recognize fascism, a piece dismayingly topical in the face of Donald Trump's ongoing popularity. But this is where the comparisons to Hitler ring hollow—per Eco's criteria, Trump is most certainly a fascist, but he's no Nazi. One of my German history professors, Elisabeth Domansky, someone who had grown up in post-war Germany, used to argue with American interpretations of German Exceptionalism, one of the myths that we propagated to prove that "it could never happen here." More importantly for me in this instance, was her insistence that the Nazis were not "irrational." They represented, she argued, the ultimate instance of the "rational" state.

This alone, the idea of Nazis as rational agents, would seem the roughest of methods by which to dismiss the Trump comparisons to Hitler without having to resort to an internet meme. Eco, on the other hand, gave us a perfect template for looking at the phenomenon of Donald Trump. Eco, too, argued that Hitler had a complete philosophy as a dictator. Mussolini had no such thing. "Mussolini did not have any philosophy; he had only rhetoric." Mussolini began as a militant atheist, but embraced religion when "the bishops ... blessed the Fascist pennants." Fascism originated in Italy, and Eco stresses that to understand fascism, one must first understand that fascism "was a *fuzzy* [original emphasis] totalitarianism, a collage of different philosophical and political ideas, a beehive of contradictions," ... [run by men where] "few of them had the intellectual equipment to control it." It does not make fascism tolerant—Gramsci, the one who taught us about concepts like "cultural hegemony"—died in a fascist prison. And yet, Eco also argued that fascism was a "rigid discombobulation" "philosophically out of joint" but nevertheless "firmly fastened to some archetypal foundations."

And then, in order to bring some order to this primordial soup that was fascism, Eco offered "fourteen ways of looking at a fascist." And it is in looking at these fourteen ways that the gallimaufry of Donald Trump's press releases, speeches, and the rhetoric of his followers begins to feel contiguous with Mussolini's archetypal fascism. (Only yesterday, Trump **retweeted** a quotation from Il Duce.)

In order to make these things clear, I spent more time than anyone should at Trump's website. What I found was a host of contradictions, endlessly empty rhetoric, and outright fear-mongering. There were times when, reading Trump's press releases, I began to wonder if anyone on his staff was aware of the basic concept of subject/verb agreement. To be honest, it made me feel dirty, reading it, but in the spirit of intellectual inquiry, here goes.

### **Umberto Eco's Fourteen Ways of Looking at a Fascist**

1. The first way may seem obvious. "The first feature of Ur-Fascism is the *cult of tradition*." Eco, of course, recognizes this as a generalization—traditionalism emerged long before fascism—but goes on to explain that early fascism relied on a selective, syncretistic traditionalism, a hodgepodge of rhetoric masking as ideas, perfect to fire up any crowd. Most important for the cult of tradition is the idea that all wisdom comes from the past. "Truth has already been spelled out once and for all, and we can only keep interpreting its obscure message."

At Trump's site, he has chosen a series of newspaper articles he refers to as "media," none of which are critical of his candidacy. Instead, he delights in featuring the work of unnamed journalists who keep trying to interpret his appeal for their readers. Other choices on his media page are telling, too. In an article entitled, "Political Correctness—The Reason the World Needs to Use its Trump Card," the impassioned author offers these thoughts, all featured on Trump's website. "Political correctness is destroying America, and Western civilization." Among "all" the problems faced by America caused by political correctness are "declining educational standards, increasing secularism, the police not being allowed to do their job, an inability to secure her borders," all the result of this: "The intellectual tyranny, self-loathing and choking conformity of this ideology has feminized and weakened a once great continent which now aspires to mediocrity." (Note the elision of "continent" to stand for America.) It is of note that Trump posts these articles without comment, and without byline, as if to channel these writers' words and claim them as his own.

According to this nameless writer, the "ideology" of political correctness has attempted to destroy some eternal notion of the real world, the way of the world, and as a consequence, we have all been feminized. (And we all know how Trump feels about men who have been feminized.) It's also interesting to note that the author refers to Trump as "the alpha male prepared to win for his people," battling against a philosophy begun on college campuses and "armed through social media by electronic cockroaches that should never have been given a voice." Don't try to argue that the First Amendment gives everyone free speech. The unnamed author forgets the First Amendment in his zeal to stomp on the electronic cockroaches that I assume describes writers like me.

2. Eco says in point number two that "traditionalism implies the *rejection of modernism*" although he argued that fascists rejected the "Spirit of 1789 (and of 1776, of course)." Perhaps Eco was not prescient enough to see how that Spirit of 1776 could be re-purposed to turn us into freedom fighters continuing to wage war against the Socialist influence of an effete Europe.

3. Number three tells us that “irrationalism also depends on the cult of *action for action’s sake*” where “thinking is a form of emasculation.” In addition to that quoted above, consider a sentence in a press release put out by Trump that would give composition teachers fits: “Over time, our culture of life in this country has started sliding toward a culture of death.” “Over time?” Is that the same as “Since the beginning of time” or “people have always?” Aside from the lousy writing, let’s consider this idea that we inhabit a “culture of life.” Was that when we counted African-Americans as three fifths of a person? Denied women the vote? Employed children? Interned Japanese-Americans in camps? Sent succeeding generations of men to die on fields of battle to distract them from economic disparity in their own backyards?

But, Trump cautions, best not to think. He ends his press release by declaring, “A culture of life is too important to let slip away for convenience or political correctness. It is by preserving our culture of life that we will Make America Great Again.” Again, the complication to “thinking” represented by “political correctness” cannot get in the way.

4. Eco’s fourth point is worth quoting in full. “No syncretistic faith can withstand analytical criticism. The critical spirit makes distinctions, and to distinguish is a sign of modernism. In modern culture the scientific community praises disagreement as a way to improve knowledge. For Ur-Fascism, disagreement is treason.”

Where to start with this one? How about two recent examples. When a heckler tried to criticize Trump at a rally, Trump responded with “I’d like to punch him in the face.” And David Duke, former Grand Wizard of notable civil rights organization, the Ku Klux Klan, **told** his followers that “voting against Trump is treason to your heritage.”

5. In five, Eco extends the previous point by arguing that tolerance of disagreement is a sign of diversity. But “the first appeal of a fascist or prematurely fascist movement is an appeal against the intruders.” At the moment, Donald Trump is on a diplomatic mission to convince the Mexican government, which, he proclaims—in a position paper posted on his website—has been “using illegal immigration to export the crime and poverty in their own country” over to the U.S. It doesn’t matter how many articles have **debunked** this, the “fact” has stuck. Trump is running Willie Horton-style ads in which he details an isolated grisly crime committed by an immigrant as all the “proof” one needs of such a truth.

It isn’t just Mexicans that Trump uses to stoke nativist fear. In his “policy” statement on China, he declares that “On day one . . . the U.S. Treasury Department will designate China as a currency manipulator.” Once this fiat has been declared, and a “level playing field” restored, American workers “will win.” The evil Chinese are currency manipulators, environmental rapists illegally avoiding the same constraints under which American manufacturers labor, and in addition, the Chinese encourage “hackers and counterfeit goods.” (I assume these are more of the electronic cockroaches.)

In addition to Trump's laws, which will smash Chinese protectionism (as opposed to laws passed by Democrats, which he says, "will never work") Trump also advocates building up our troops in areas around China. Nothing a little saber-rattling won't fix.

6. All of this feeds into point six, "...one of the most typical features of the historical fascism was the *appeal to a frustrated middle class*, a class suffering from an economic crisis or feelings of political humiliation, and frightened by the pressure of lower social groups." Feminists, #BlackLivesMatter activists, immigrants... should I go on?

7. Seven is about nationalism, especially the sense that citizenship conveys a special status that others envy. "Ur-Fascism says that their only privilege is the most common one, to be born in the same country." But as further reading of Trump material makes clear, birth on American soil is no longer good enough for citizenship. Trump's position paper states unequivocally that it's time to "end birthright citizenship." Trump does not, of course, mention that this right is enshrined in the same Constitution he earlier lauds as a document that means what it says, especially when it protects our most important freedom—the Second Amendment—but rather, cites some obscure poll that "people" favor ending this Constitutional relic by a 2-1 margin. (Again. Remember that for Eco, one of the hallmarks of fascism is how contradictory its rhetoric is.)

Perhaps more relevant is Eco's continuation of point seven: "at the root of Ur-Fascist psychology there is the *obsession with a plot*, possibly an international one. The followers must feel besieged." Thus, Donald Trump is able to call for the banning of all Muslim immigrants, a rejection of Syrian refugees, and is able to slander entire categories of human beings by claiming he witnessed thousands cheering when the World Trade Center fell.

8. This goes along with part eight, which is a sense of humiliation by the "ostentatious wealth and force of their enemies." The Chinese. The Arabs (sic). Or, even Trump's fellow crony capitalists. Most surprising is who the real enemy is when you read his position papers: The government. When Trump discusses how he will "fix" the VA, so that all veterans will have treatment on demand and close to home, he says one of the ways to fix the VA will be to end "The days of \$6.3 million for statues and fountains at VA facilities and \$300,000 for a manager to move 140 miles are over." No citations are given for these statements, but the message is clear: the real enemy of Americans is its own ostentatiously wealthy, wasteful government. The VA runs poorly not because we have failed as a nation to fund it, but rather because decadent officials have broken it.

9. Ninth for Eco was "eternal struggle." Peace is bad because it means speaking to enemies rather than fighting them. "It is bad because *life is permanent warfare*." For Trump, there is no need to negotiate with the Islamic Middle East. For Trump, the answer is to "bomb the shit out of them." While such a strategy might not discriminate between ISIS and foreign civilians, who cares when America is under siege?

**10.** Tenth is where Trump's **statement** about how he loves the poorly educated may play its greatest role. Eco wrote that fascism, rooted in traditionalism, is also rooted in an aristocratic belief in the superiority of one people over another. And so, what it offers to its followers is a "mass elitism" in which "every citizen belongs to the best people of the world," but also one in which the "Leader ... knows that his force is based upon the weakness of the masses; they are so weak as to need and deserve such a ruler."

Trump's supporters are more than happy to ascribe to him the role of Leader. He cites this recent *Washington Post* **article** as proof of how powerful he is. Among the quotations are statements that ignore facts, like Trump's previous multiple bankruptcies, or three marriages, or history of nepotism. Instead, believers go on record saying, "Mr. Trump has a clear record of business success," or "He's not afraid of offending anybody," or this one, "He tells it like it is. He can give a speech without a teleprompter. He speaks in short, declarative sentences, so people understand him. He's in the tradition of Andrew Jackson, if you ask me. And what really impresses me as a parent is that he has raised all of his children to be productive, impressive citizens, when they could very well have been trust-fund airheads." Who needs complexity when one has a leader who speaks in short, declarative statements that promise eternal action?

**11.** Eleven is the cult of the hero, one in which "*everybody is educated to become a hero.*" And heroism is linked to death. While many of us have been raised to believe that death is to be avoided, in the fascist cult of death "the Ur-Fascist hero craves heroic death, advertised as the best reward for a heroic life." And while Americans are fed stories of insane terrorist youth raised on the lie that dying for one's faith gains a straight ticket to paradise, and it is explained to us again and again how this makes them "evil," in Trump's world, he makes clear who the real heroes in our culture are: Those same veterans who have been betrayed by their own government, too busy spending money on art when it could have been tending to its true heroes.

Of course, Trump won't be volunteering soon. Nor will you see any of his "impressive citizen" children getting ready to fight. Eco reminds us that "The Ur-Fascist hero is impatient to die. In his impatience, he more frequently sends other people to death." Whose boots on the ground?

**12.** In point twelve, Eco reminds us that, unable to play at war, the fascist leader turns his attention to sex. "This is the origin of *machismo* (which implies both disdain for women and intolerance and condemnation of nonstandard sexual habits, from chastity to homosexuality.)" In this way, Trump can be *for* heterosexual marriage as an institution and at the same time, be a multiple divorcé. For him, there is no contradiction. Women are deceitful, weak, defined by their menstrual blood and their "pussies." And we already know what he thinks of men he deems to have been feminized.

**13.** In the neighborhood I moved to a couple of months ago, yard signs declare that "The Silent Majority Stands with Trump." The fact that these particular signs are in front of beachfront mansions notwithstanding, in my more working-class part of the neighborhood, the more common

Trump signs have proliferated like a deep blue mold. This speaks to point thirteen for Eco, this existence of a “selective populism” where the majority speaks for all, and the majority is in alignment with the Leader. In fact, back in 1995, Eco wrote, “There is in our future a TV or Internet populism, in which the emotional response of a selected group of citizens can be presented and accepted as the Voice of the People.”

And who, according to Eco, would this qualitative populism target? “*Rotten parliamentary governments.*” In fact, whenever a candidate casts doubt on the legitimacy of a parliamentary government because it “no longer represents the Voice of the People, we can smell Ur-Fascism.”

**14.** Finally, point fourteen was about the language by which we would recognize Ur-Fascism. It would speak with an “impoverished vocabulary, and an elementary syntax, in order to limit the instruments for complex and critical reasoning.”

Ask a typical Trump supporter why they support him and, as dozens of Facebook friends and newspaper reports tell us, it seems to be about his ability to “say what’s on his mind.” But ask them to define any of Trump’s policies, and they begin to sound like Trump himself, when, during the debate on February 25th, he **repeated himself** again and again when asked to expand on his plan to make “healthcare better.” “No! There’s nothing to add. What is to add? What is to add?”

Godwin’s Law says that when comparisons to Hitler start getting made, the argument is lost. But I’m not comparing Trump to Hitler. On the contrary, Trump has *not* mentioned gas chambers (although he has **mentioned** he would “absolutely” implement a database of all Muslims living in the United States). But we know that any attempts to draw lines between Trump and Hitler are bound to end tangled up with Internet memes. It seems not only more intellectually honest, but also more accurate, to argue that Trump is tapping into the fourteen elements of Ur-Fascism, that Eco, who had lived through Italian fascism, and who understood that words, even the most banal, have meaning, laid out for us. So, the job of writers is to continue to ask of Trump’s followers, “Yes. He speaks his mind. But what does he mean when he says these things?”