Transcript for Timothy Snyder | Twentieth Century Lessons on Tyranny (Episode 629)
Full show notes found here: https://theartofcharm.com/629/

TIMOTHY: As soon as you start thinking of your neighbor is someone you do now, as opposed to someone who's your fellow citizen or your neighbor, then you were taking part in the authority and regime change. Everybody knows this and if we choose not to understand it, then we're inviting problems.

JORDAN: Welcome to The Art of Charm, I'm Jordan Harbinger and I'm here with producer Jason DeFillippo. Today we're talking with Timothy Snyder, a professor of history at Yale and one of the most celebrated historians of the Holocaust. His latest book is *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*. I read this book when it first came out a few months back. It's been on the best seller's list almost the entire time since then. Jason, you've read this a bunch of times, have you not?

JASON: Yeah, I've read this book four times so far. I got it on Audible and when I go take a walk I'll just pop it on because it is so fascinating.

JORDAN: Yeah it's a short book. It's an hour read. Go get it, we'll link to it in the show notes. Especially if you want something to just listen to real quick, it's got 20 discrete lessons you can easily consume. You should listen to this episode if you want to learn how to think, to protect your rights and our democracy -- we'll discuss mindsets to become and stay aware of shifts in how we and others around us think and behave. We'll detail small actions we can take very day to ensure that we're doing our part to maintain an open and free society for ourselves, our families, and our communities. And last but not least, some scary historical comparisons and some even scarier current comparisons that we can use to become sharper and more discerning critical thinkers when it comes to consuming information and with respect to our roles in America or the world today. Now, let's hear from Timothy Snyder.

What is the story of this book's formulation? And it's a little scary, when I saw this -- I actually read it right when it came out thinking, "Oh, this will be this cool academic-ish overview of subjects that I'm interested in." And I've lived in the former Yugoslavia, I've got a lot of friends in Russia, I lived in the former East Germany, so I've kind of grown up in places, in certain times of my life around that -- is nostalgia really the right word for it where it's like, "Well things were great back then. Oh, they were also horrible and terrible. But, there was also this good thing," because that's how people remember their childhoods or their teenage years kind of regardless of what's going on, unless maybe there's a war in the country where you're living. And even then, sometimes, it just depends on how affected you were by that same war. And, I ended up reading a practical how-to guide about how to deal with something that you just really hope never happens to your country.

TIMOTHY: So the story of the book coming about is the story of me coming home. I'm an American and I'm a historian but I'm not an American historian. I work on Eastern Europe, which means that I've spent the last 25 years learning lots of difficult languages and spending time with a lot of difficult sources, having to do 10 or 15 years with Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union and some of the darker chapters of European history. To do that, I've had teachers and those teachers have very often been people who lived through communism and often fascism. And then as I've done that and gotten older, I've had my own students, people from Eastern Europe who have seen democracy recede.

So when I write the the Twenty Lessons in November of 2016, what I'm bringing to it is the sense that it can happen -- that is democratic republics can collapse -- I'm bringing to it the sense that it can happen to people like us because the people I learn from or teach are people like us. And then also the sense that it can happen here because I just don't have the assumption that Americans are wiser or smarter or nimbler than my friends in other countries where democracy has collapsed. That's all in the background when Mr. Trump wins the election. I'd been

worried over the course of 2016. I'd written a fair amount about the Russia story -- which I think I was actually the first person in the U.S. to write about. I wrote about interference in the elections in the summer of 2016.

What I was thinking in November was that this is going to be a shock. "What I can do is I can try and compress the things that I think I have -- from wiser heads than me, basically -- from the people who've experiences national socialism, communism -- try and bring into some sort of crisp, clear form quickly so that Americans can make use of it while there's still time to do so." That's the story of the book. So it comes out of, you know -- two times it comes out of my whole adult life and then it comes out of that specific moment which I wanted to react to quickly.

We want to hope it's not going to happen to our country and we want to make the distinction in between our country and other countries and we want to imagine -- and I think the huge majority of Americans do imagine -- that America is somehow cut off from the rest of history, that America is somehow special. And you see how people spin their wheels when that's clearly not true. So, some of the main reactions from people who are worried about the election of Mr. Trump were things like, "Well, we've always been a great country. We've always been a democracy," which is not really true. "The institutions will protect us," or fundamentally, "It can't happen here," and the problem, when you don't know the history of authoritarianism is you don't realize that your own normal human reactions -- those forms of exceptionalism which are pretty harmless day to day -- are a complete moral and political trap when your institutions are actually at risk.

So I was writing the book to make sure -- I tried to help to make sure that people wouldn't just turn their heads away -- wouldn't just say, "It can't happen here," wouldn't just say that, "America is exceptional." Because, in some ways we are and some ways we're not but you don't know how wonderful you are until you've actually been tested. And now is the moment when we are being tested.

JORDAN: I think it is an interesting phenomenon really, for lack of a better word, that we as Americans don't get how lucky we are in terms of our government, in terms of our history, especially if you are a white, male American, you really don't get it because you never really had to deal with it in your lifetime, no matter how old you are -- if you're still alive. And we don't really see that democracies can fail, we can get unlucky pretty fast, as far as being Americans -- especially the middle class white dudes in America. And the Americans of today are kind of like the Czech or pre-communist Eastern Europeans of not even a century ago.

TIMOTHY: Yeah there's a lot of wonderful stuff in that comment. I mean I love that you mentioned Czechoslovakia because the Czechs are actually a good example of a country which in the '20s and '30s was more democratic than the United States was at the time, by many measures including its acceptance of minorities. And yet none the less, collapses into communism after the Second World War in 1948 and many people at the time thought it was a good thing.

Many people were in a kind of a dream state or kind of alternative reality which Milan Kundera captures very nicely in novels. And those are people who are very much like us. I mean if anything politically, probably a little bit more savvy than we are. I also love that you mentioned luck because I'm an American historian but when I look at the U.S. I think, "Yeah, there were these moments where we had to have good leadership and damn were we lucky with Washington, with Lincoln, with Franklin Delano Roosevelt," -- I mean every couple of generations we had to have a good leader and by the standards of the time, those were exceptional leaders. Now the next moment and we're unlucky. We have terrifyingly bad leadership. If we'd gotten lucky now, we would have gotten lucky, but we didn't. And so in that sense, it's of course time we really have been tested.

And then your point about U.S. history is also really well taken. Part of our notion of exceptionalism, you know, that we're not vulnerable is this conceit that we've always been a democracy but we haven't really meaningfully been a democracy. There are plenty of countries who have been more democratic than we have been at various times including right now. We're not a model democracy now but the story that America has been a democracy for 200 years is -- that's something that you say. That, you know, one white guy says to another white guy, the other white guy nods. Women have been able to vote for a century, African Americans have been able to vote for half a century, and in the last 10 or 15 years, we've actually been moving away from democracy with the more specific gerrymandering, with the voter suppression laws, with Citizens United, the endless money in politics -- we've been drifting away from democracy rather than moving towards. So democracy in America is a kind of aspiration.

Part of what I'm after in the book is to remind us that democracy has to be an activity, you know, not just waiting for 2018 or 2020 but acting in such a way that we might get better outcomes in 2018 and 2020.

JORDAN: So if Americans are no wiser than the Europeans who saw their democracy yield to fascism, nazism, communism -- depending on which part of that geographical disaster you were a part of -- our advantage really is what -- that we can learn from watching what happened over there from a distance, hopefully?

TIMOTHY: Yeah, I mean, this is why the book is a case for history. You're right, it's absolutely not an academic history book. It's something quite different. It's really a manual. It's a political pamphlet that gives advice drawing from history. But as such it's also a case for history that there's a whole lot of wisdom that remains from the confrontation with communism or the confrontation with fascism or with other kinds of authoritarianism and that that wisdom is accessible to us if we just accept that we need it and look back and learn from others. That's the advantage.

The thing that terrifies me is how we can just look away from that, how we can just imagine that, “Oh, this has never happened to anyone else,” -- either we say -- You know, there are two American impulses, the first is, “It’s not happening,” and the second is, “If it is happening, nothing like this has ever happened to anyone before ever, and therefore no experience is relevant,” right? Whereas, in fact, things that are happening now resemble other things that have happened to other people and if we can just break free of the horizon of everyday experience, if we can just get out of the horizon of the daily news and look back a little bit, there are all these helpful bits of advice which were left precisely for us.

I mean, the people that I’m citing in the book -- and this is probably important. I mean, the book is not so much me being smart, the book is my trying to recall other people who are smarter than we are at more difficult moments. If we think of Victor Klemperer keeping a diary in Nazi Germany or Vaclav Havel, writing *The Power of the Powerless* in Communist Czechoslovakia -- they weren’t writing for themselves, they were writing for other people and they weren’t even writing necessarily for their own times, they were writing for the future and that’s the generosity that we have to accept.

If we can accept that, you know, then the way we see the present changes because instead of just being stunned and confused and overwhelmed by the daily news cycle, we can think, “Okay, I’m part of some kind of a tradition of people from whom I’m going to learn and then I can take what I’ve learned from them into today and into the future and I can make a little bit of a difference.”

JORDAN: I think the thing that really surprised me the most -- and freaked me out the most -- was when the election was going on and my friends in the former East Germany who had lived through the East German regime which is pretty terrifying -- friends who live in Russia, Ukraine, and in the former Yugoslavia where I used to work -- they predicted the outcome

of the election pretty clearly, well in advance of the press here at home and it was too many people for them to have just gotten lucky or for their collective paranoia -- which I used to make fun of them for -- to have really played a part.

I used to really kind of laugh when they'd tell me things like -- I mean there's all kinds of conspiracy theories abound over in those places as well, so I just kind of chalked it up to that way of thinking when you grow up where everything is being manipulated all the time and you do really only have a one party state. And it was kind of disserving when they said, "This is what's going to happen because this is who's going to believe it and this is the reaction that's going to happen as a result." Turns out that we gave ourselves a lot more credit than maybe we were due in many ways.

TIMOTHY: Yeah. I had a very similar experience as I was kind of going in and out of my American bubble in 2016. I try to look at America from a Russian point of view because, you know, there are lots of smart people in Russia and, you know, they over do things and they see conspiracies when they're not there, as you say. But, very often they can be quite penetrating about aspects of American life that maybe we would be shy about being specific about. You know, when you look at the U.S. from a Russian point of view in 2016, you think, "Yeah, here's a vulnerable society, here's a polarized society, here's a naive society where people are not critical about what they read. Here's an electoral system which is shockingly open to outside interference, both technologically but also just morally because no one expects it to come."

I'm kind of describing what the Kremlin actually did to us but I'm trying to say something broader which is that if you take a step away from the U.S. and look at it, it does actually look rather vulnerable to the kind of thing which hit us in 2016. And yeah, my experience is similar to yours where, you know, my friends on the Polish left or friends on the Ukrainian left or my Russian dissident friends were saying that this could happen. I mean, because they recognize Trump as a kind politician but

also because they recognize the fake news and the kind of subterranean propaganda of the attacks on Hillary Clinton and the stolen emails as the kind of politics they knew and which they knew could work, especially in a place where they hadn't been tested.

So the one funny thing about Ukrainians, for example, is that they're much more resistant to this kind of thing than we are because they've seen it before. They've grown up with it. They know what it is. I have this funny experience where a Ukrainian war journalist friend of mine dropped into Ohio and within just -- basically within a day -- she was saying, "Trump is going to win," and I thought, "Hmm, you know it's interesting that one smart person coming from a completely different society, who actually just goes and talks to people, is going to get it right, whereas our entire media complex is basically going to get it wrong. There's an upside to this, although it's a bit of a strange upside, and the upside is to recognize we are in one world -- that we can learn from other people. We're not these problems that we have.

One of the things we can do is we can reach out to other people and learn from them. And that's part of what the book does, I mean some of the lessons in the book -- for example even the term "corporeal politics," which I mean just getting yourself outside and doing your politics outside and not in front of the screen -- these are things that I've learned from younger people from democracies that have been challenged. So, that can be heartening to realize that you're not alone.

JORDAN: I think that is heartening in some ways but it's also disheartening because I don't want to live in Ukraine. I've lived in Ukraine before and I didn't like the government there.

TIMOTHY: No, I'm trying to give an upside at the end. [00:13:57] of the book that the range of possible outcomes is a lot broader than Americans usually -- we think, "Oh, well it's going to be some form of democracy," but why should it be? That's not the lesson of history at all. We have people in the executive branch now

who are indifferent -- and hostile in fact -- to democracy and the rule of law.

So, our imagination may only extend to various forms of democracy but reality extends much further than that. It's like what we can see is the visible spectrum. There's the whole realm of gamma rays and cosmic rays and so on, beyond that visible spectrum which is also possible. We need history and we need some knowledge of contemporary authoritarianism so we have some idea of what's possible. On the other hand though, if we have that -- if we see that, you know, if we sort of retune ourselves so we can see all of that, it gives us the tools to fight back. Even if we do it fast enough, I think we can prevent these worse outcomes from coming in.

So, you know, on the one hand it's much worse and on the other hand it's also much better. Yeah, I don't want to live in Ukraine, I want to live in a non-kleptocratic, non-authoritarian, democratic, egalitarian United States of America. That's what I would like.

JORDAN: So then if things like that -- if things like democracy is failing -- which usually happens. It doesn't mean they'd fall into something like Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union. But, democracies set up with good constitutions and good faith, generally do fail. That's what history says and you're a historian so you can correct me if I'm wrong. But, it seems like -- of course we don't think those things are possible here and they're possible here just as they're possible elsewhere. So, is what we're doing here primarily fighting normalization of the erosion of our rights? Or what's the primary thing that we have to do here?

TIMOTHY: Yeah, I think that's a good characterization. The primary thing is fighting normalization. That's why lesson number one in *On Tyranny* is, "Don't obey in advance," because if we accept that this shock is going to overwhelm us and we're just now going to take whatever happens every day as normal, then we're done. Then we don't have a chance. One of the things that we do

know about 1933 in Germany and about authoritarian regime changes in general, is that in the beginning the new rulers required consent. Unorthodox forms of consent, just not reacting, looking away, internally adjusting your own expectations, and obeying in advance -- that is you start thinking, “What are they new rulers going to want?,” and you start doing it.

If you do that, then you’re psychologically lost because you’ve started to normalize your own soul. It’ll be very difficult for you to walk back that process. You’re also politically lost because the one time when authoritarian regime changes are vulnerable, is in the first weeks and months. So if you waste the first weeks and months by saying, “This isn’t such a big deal,” or by looking away, you’re probably not going to have a second chance to go back and to do anything. So, if you can fight the normalization -- if you can say, “Here I am. I am not with this program. I think this is basically wrong. I’m going to think about what kind of American I want to be,” -- if you can do that, if you can just be a stick in the mud while everybody else is drifting, then you have a chance to do other things.

So that’s why lesson number one is lesson number one because everything else follows from that. If you can do that -- and it’s harder than it sounds -- then there are a lot of other things you can do that are very effective. But if you blow that one, then you’re basically taking part in the authoritarian regime change, whether you like it or not, that’s what you’re doing.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

JORDAN: Can you give us an example of what it means to obey in advance? You said yes to try to figure out what the regime wants and then do it. But what does that look like in practice?

TIMOTHY: Yeah, so one would be the moment of a victory. So you could be the kind of person who thought that Trump was unacceptable, for whatever reason. Let’s say you thought he was an opponent of the rule of law -- which he is -- let’s say you thought that he

wasn't a patriot and someone who is likely to betray the U.S. -- which he also is -- let's say you thought he was a misogynist, which he also is -- let's say you're just categorically opposed to him. But then the moment when he wins you find yourself saying, "Oh, but on the other hand, you know, maybe he's got a point about X,Y, or Z," and as soon as you open that aperture, you know, then all the poisonous air starts to rush in and then next thing you know, you'll be saying he's right about something else, something else, something else -- and before you know it you're saying, "Well he's just like -- I mean, he's got his problems but he's just a politician like the others." If I could summarize that it would be like the expression on Wolf Blitzer's face on election night -- like people realizing that they think it's their job to make this normal.

A second example would be at the level of civil servants. So, historically, in Germany for example, if the civil servants hadn't treated the Hitler regime as the normal top of the hierarchy, then the Hitler regime wouldn't have been possible. And I'm not saying that we're exactly like that or that our civil servants are that yielding, because they're not. But, it is a reaction in the civil service to say, "Okay, the new leadership is going to be against human rights and therefore I'm going to start preemptively disabling that part of my job," and doing it even before the orders actually come down. That's built into people who work in bureaucracies and they have think -- they have to be active if they don't want to do something like that.

A third example of not obeying in advance has to do with -- the most fundamental one I think, and there are other chapters in the book -- has to do with accepting what's true or what's not true. So one of the forms of normalization that you see a lot of in the United States -- and it's the one that the authoritarian regime changes are aiming for and it's the one that authoritarians of the Putin and Trump variety tries more than anything else because when people say, "Well, you know, I'm not really sure what's happening because on the one hand these medias say this and on the other hand these medias say that but President Trump says this and Comey says the other

thing. I don't really know." And that's obeying in advance because as soon as you give up on figuring things out for yourself, you're then just going to drift, because without the ability to figure things out for yourself, you're basically done. So those are some of the ways it can look.

JORDAN: So what are the differences between media silos, right? Because that's what a lot of people do say. They say things like, "Well, this news is probably fake so that other news is probably fake. I'm just going to watch Netflix," or, "Sure, Comey said this in the hearing but, you know, he leaked this other information. I mean, he said that too and then this other side that said that so we just don't even know who's telling the truth. I give up," again, "I'm going to go watch Netflix. Why bother? Everyone's a big liar."

TIMOTHY: You know, if you want to be an authoritarian, that's exactly -- like if you want to be in an authoritarian society, that's exactly the pose that you need to strike and that's exactly the mood that you need to have. And I think it's pretty important for people when they say, you know, just to use your -- I'll use your phrase. When people say, "I don't know, I'm just going to watch Netflix," that means that you're actively taking part in the transformation of the United States of America from a republic to an authoritarian regime, if that's your attitude.

We're not in a moment where you have options that aren't choices. Everything you do is a choice. If you just say, "I don't know. I'm going to go sit on my couch," you're making a choice and the choice is for authoritarianism. And let me just explain that. If you want to have a republic, that means you have to be a citizen. And being a citizen means you try to figure things out for yourself. If you give up on the impulse to figure things out for yourself -- if you just say, "Well it's a bunch of stories, one way or the other way," then that means that, whoever has the more firepower -- whoever can generate the biggest spectacle -- is going to win.

If you stop trying to figure things out for yourself, whenever there's some kind of shocking event, whether it's a war, terrorist attack, something completely invented -- doesn't matter, you're going to get pulled along by the crowd, you're going to get pulled along by your emotions, and the system is going to continue to fall down around you. The answer is we have to do some things which make us feel a little bit uncomfortable, which is okay because freedom is uncomfortable. I mean being in an authoritarian regime is pretty comfortable, you're just unfree and poor. It's comfortable because you don't really have to think, you know, you can just watch the Netflix. You have to do something which is uncomfortable and that is just say, "Look, I think that the facts are out there and I think I can figure them out and I think that this is important."

In our present cultural moment that can sound naive, right? It can sound like, "Oh, well," you know, "don't you realize it's all fake," right? I mean everybody has become a kind of epistemic 17 year old. Like, "Oh, yeah, we don't know. We don't trust mom, we don't trust dad, we don't trust our grandparents," you know? And people think that's the height of enlightenment is not to believe in anything. That's not an attitude you can really afford in politics. In politics you have to say, "Sure I'll make mistakes but I'm going to try to figure it out for myself."

How can you figure it out for yourself? You can pay attention to people whose job it is and those are the investigative reporters. We do actually know a fair amount about the Trump administration but every single little thing that we know, we know thanks to people whose job it is to figure it out, mainly being investigative reporters working for places like The Guardian or the Washington Post or the Times -- people who actually do that day to day and have method and have discipline.

But if you just discard the TV and the Internet for a moment and only pay attention to people whose job it is to figure out what's happening, you will actually have a pretty good idea of what's

happening. I mean, part of the tragedy of all this is that it's really within our grasp to have a sense of what's happening and to avoid the cynicism. But you have to take that little tiny risk of saying, "Hey I care. I care about knowing, I care about learning and therefore going to follow these journalists. I'm going to pay attention to people whose job it is to actually get things right."

JORDAN: I think that is a challenge because self-deception is a pretty seductive habit and it becomes a state of mind. Self-deception and laziness, but mostly self-deception couches laziness, right? Kind of like, "Well, you know, I don't have time to figure all this out. I'm just going to go on with my life," really isn't just laziness, it's kind of like, "Hey I think there's something really bad going on but I'm afraid I'm actually going to see more of it if I look for the truth so I'm going to ignore it for now and hope it goes away," even though in the back of my head I know it's not going anywhere.

Timothy: Yeah, I mean, that's part of what being a free person is like, I think -- is overcoming impulses like that, which as you say, are totally human and totally normal. It goes back precisely to the framers of the constitution which is where the book starts. They think -- and they're, I think, quite right -- that our natural tendency is towards tyranny. They're worried that when push comes to shove, Americans are not going to cut it. I think, you know -- justified in worrying about that. If anything, they thought the republic was going to last much less long than it actually has lasted. So, I mean, I think if they were looking -- I mean it's a stupid thing to say -- but if they were looking at us now, they wouldn't be surprised that we deceived ourselves or that we were lazy or that in some part of our body or some part of the political system, we actually want to have authoritarianism so we don't have to think about things. That wouldn't surprise them in the least.

They thought that we would have appropriate institutions such as the free press to alert us -- to give us a chance of not acting in this way. They thought we had to have checks and balances

so that the Judiciary, for example, could react against the Executive to give us a chance of thinking in a way which is contrary to the way that the leaders are going to think. But now I'm going to say something completely different which is that a lot of this is actually habit. So a lot of what the book *On Tyranny* is trying to propose is that how we carve up the time in our days can have a great influence on how we think about the politics of the world -- how much influence we think we actually have.

If we can manage to do little dumb things like spend an hour or less on the Internet every day and subscribe to newspapers, then that unbelievably elementary habit of picking up a newspaper at the doorstep can make us feel more connected and more active in the world. If we just sort of drown ourselves on Facebook until we've had enough and then turn on the TV, not only are we less well-informed but we also feel helpless. We feel like we can't really do anything, there's just too much [00:28:11]. A lot of it has to do with how we actually treat our bodies. Like, what do we do to our bodies? What kind of day do we have every day? And that's as close to a fitness guru as I'm going to get so my response is over.

JORDAN: So, what can we do to actually increase our ability to take responsibility? In fact, one of the things that you mention in the book *On Tyranny* is to take responsibility for the face of the world. In other words -- or at least in my other words -- maybe be skeptical about propaganda and the things you hear. Search for truth and things like that and also -- this is one of the primary functions of this show in many ways is to challenge people to think about things they might otherwise take for granted.

What else can we do to motivate ourselves to take responsibility for the things that are happening around us -- for the conversations people are having? You even get into this when you talk about defending the language and is seems almost a little bit ridiculous on its face until I read it to understand what you meant by this -- that we should actually

monitor the language we're using in our own heads or that we're using in conversations with others.

TIMOTHY: Yeah. On the one hand, our predicament is a lot more dire than we, I think, would like to admit and that's the element of the self-deception that you're talking about earlier. On the other hand, this means that we have much more power than we think we do. Since authoritarian regime changes require consent, we have all kinds of powerful although relatively simple ways to deny consent. All kinds of things which ordinarily might not be that politically significant are much more significant now. So, for example, the small talk. It makes a lot of difference now whether we choose to talk to people who might feel excluded or whether we just let ourselves drift.

In the memoirs of authoritarian regime changes -- whether it's Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union or communist Eastern Europe, you probably know this -- there's always that moment where the person remembers, "Well my neighbor who always said hi to me no longer says hi to me," or, "My business colleague now is walking across the street and not talking to me." If we can just avoid doing that, if we can make sure that we're talking to the people -- everybody who might possibly feel marginalized or targeted by this government -- we're already making a big difference. Not only for them but also for ourselves. How we use the language -- you mentioned this. This is lesson nine I think, "Be kind to the language." This is hugely important.

One of the ways that our sense of imagination gets crushed -- gets compressed -- is that we fill our heads over and over again with the things that people are saying today. And if course it's natural to try to figure out what's going on today. I mean, very exciting things are happening every day but the way that the news covers it is by using extraordinarily small vocabulary which is largely designed by, you know, the administration and its opponents every morning pitching a few very short clichés to the media about what's happening. And then those talking

points, you know, pound their ways into our brains over the course of the news cycle.

If we read, if we take some distance, if we use broader swaths of the language, if we have enough time in our day to read a few pages of a novel or a few pages of a history book, then we can express ourselves differently. And just in the act of expressing ourselves differently, we also broaden the political discussion so that it becomes less about the yes and the no, less about accepting or denying the day's talking point and more about, perhaps, what's -- figuring out what's going on. If we all use the language more broadly we end up broadening the whole public sphere and we end up creating the possibility for more connections among people. These are all -- and you know, face the world which you mentioned.

This is also hugely important. I mean, the example which is closest to my heart are the swastikas because I work on the Holocaust. There just are now more swastikas in the U.S. then there were before. There are also more people who are getting up early in the morning and whitewashing the swastikas than there were before. And those people are making a difference because if we get used to seeing the swastikas then we can also get used to other things. Where we are means that little activities, especially regular ones, can make a huge difference. But we have to accept where we are. If we accept where we are then we can also see that these small things, which don't appear to be political, actually are politically very powerful.

JORDAN: Why is that? This seems like such a small thing. Like, again, going back to the language. Who cares if I use the same tropes that are on the news or that pop culture sources are using? Aren't those the same ones that are being used by both sides? I mean, isn't that the common language? Why should I worry about which words we're using and on that same note, why does it matter if I talk to the people I work with or talk to my neighbors or I don't?

I mean, I have definitely noticed that difference in Eastern Europe and even in the former East Germany. People just didn't talk to each other that much even afterwards because it wasn't really a culture that was built out like that. And, they were our immediate neighbors in Germany that we were very close to but when I looked in countries like Yugoslavia and things like that, a lot of the people -- they didn't even really know who lived in their same apartment building. When I was in Ukraine, there were people that lived in the same building as us with the family that I lived with and they've been there for years and years and years and we saw people in the hall, and when I was with them they never said anything and I thought that was really weird.

TIMOTHY: You've answered your question really beautifully but I'm going to take a stab at it anyway. When Americans think about what an authoritarian government would look like or what a repressive state would look like, I think we first think of the big personalities -- we think of Hitler, we think of Stalin -- and then we imagine a government that has unlimited power which is overwhelming -- which can do whatever it wants. And when we do this, what we're effectively doing is we're ascribing to Hitler and Stalin superpowers. These people who just kind of stride onto the stage and they can do whatever they want.

That way of thinking about it perfectly destroys all of our responsibility -- all of the responsibility of the Germans, all of the responsibility of the Russians, or whoever it might be. Because it's always the case that masses of people have to, in some way, participate, if only passively, if only by letting things happen. Not letting things happen involves thinking of yourself as an individual and choosing how you're going to talk and how you're going to make your way through the world.

Just the very decision that you're going to be an individual and that you're going to talk about things in your own way actually matters tremendously because it means -- to take your example -- that you can talk to your neighbors or you can talk to somebody in a bar who may or may not agree with you

completely but if you've got your own way of talking which doesn't immediately fall into one thing or the other thing, then you might find some other areas where you can agree or you can at least get along where they see you as a person and maybe something that you say sticks in their mind and ends up having some kind of conversation later on.

Another very important thing is the possibility of trust, right? So this is something we take for granted. We take trust for granted like we've taken air for granted. There are all kinds of things that are possible in our basically functional rule of law society that depend upon trust. Trust depends on language. If we get so deep down in our silos that we can't communicate one with the other, if we all just repeat various kinds of cliches, then we end up not trusting one another. If we don't trust one another then we can't really have the rule of law and we can't really have democracy. I'm thinking of this because of your example of Ukraine or post communist situations.

In soviet setups, people were only free in the kitchen. People did have a deep sense of trust but for a very small of other people -- usually family members or close friends -- and you would talk in the kitchen. Literally, in the kitchen. It's normal for a totalitarian state. If you want to avoid that kind of thing, you have to try as an individual citizen to keep the trust going, to keep the communication going outside of the home, in other places. One way this really struck me was in the run up to the election where I realized that when I was talking to people about politics, that I was very often not talking to them, I was interrupting the conversation they were just having with their Facebook feed. It was like I was intervening in their desire to be all alone with the one thing which they trusted which was their computer, basically. If we go too far in that direction we're just not going to trust one another as people. But I think, you know -- I think we can break that, we just have to be aware that it's happening.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

JORDAN: Yeah I think that being aware that it's happening is actually kind of tricky in the moment because -- you give actually a really brilliant analogy of this. I believe it was in something I've read online, speaking of my Facebook feed. But, that people forget what freedom and we forget what liberty are. It's like cake. Once it's gone, you just don't know what it is. It's not like, "Oh, yeah, there's some of that somewhere," it's just gone. You have no concept of it at any point, anymore.

TIMOTHY: Yeah, this is an obsession of mine that we can give up freedom the same way that heat rises from hot water. At a certain point it's just not there and the water has become cold and, you know, you start to shrink and you're unhappy. But, you're not really sure exactly when it happens. When does it go wrong? Everything was fine was for a long time. Part of our problem is that -- I'm not speaking for you but -- so few of us have actually done anything to deserve living in a free society and this is partly a generational issue. I think one of the reasons we're so obsessed -- or were until recently -- with the Second World War, is this notion that those are people who did something, right?

But all across the West, we've now lost touch with the moments in the 20th century when freedom really was -- I mean, not to sound too dramatic or like a mini series -- but where freedom of tens of millions of people really did hang by a thread and where it was clear that actions did matter. We've lost track of that and so -- and the irony is we can jump too quickly to thinking, "Well nothing that we do really matters," and we lack the imagination of what losing freedom would be like. We think, you know, "We'll see it coming," but we won't. Unless we know how to look we won't see it coming. I mean if you don't see it coming now, with the denunciation programs at the Department of Homeland Security, with the obvious targeting of Muslims and other people just because they can marginally associated with the bad parts of globalization, the total mendacity campaign of the White House, with the demand for loyalty -- which is a fascist cliche -- if you don't see it coming now, that means you're never going to see it coming.

You have to recognize that it's not going to come at you like some black figure, right? It's not going to come at you like some overwhelming supervillain. It's going to come at you by getting into your personality, making you think, "Eh, I can do without this, I can do without that. It's kind of fun to denounce people. What's the big deal if there's a swastika on the train station in my neighborhood?" You get used to things and then you live in this world that's half free and half not but then the terrifying thing, at least for me -- the thing which animates me -- is the notion that the next generation of Americans could have no idea what being free is actually like. And then the one after them and then we'd have to go through the entire thing all over again from the start and who knows if we would.

JORDAN: Right who knows if we would especially now that technology and things like that make it easier to entrench things like this and make them -- regimes like this and make them more ubiquitous. When you see outside resistance reforming Germany, that resistance came from a free United States. It wasn't going to happen from inside, most likely. And if it did, it was going to take a long time. There's a reason that Hitler called it the 1000 year reich. I mean, it wasn't something that was going to stop -- in his mind -- with another election during his lifetime or during the next 10 lifetimes of people that he had planned to succeed him. Labeling groups of your friends and neighbors is the bad part of globalization. Picking out a group of your neighbors and citizens -- fellow citizens -- and associating them with some sort of world-wide globalist threat -- well, gee, that sounds like 1930, doesn't it?

TIMOTHY: Well, yeah. Of course it is and it's a quite conscious use of that history. One of the reasons we can't afford to let history go is that people who like the 1930s haven't let history go. American and European right wing and fascist thinkers of the 1930s are in fashion in the alt-right. They're in fashion with Mr. Bannon. We can say, "Oh, that doesn't really matter," but if it matters to the people who are governing us, then it matters to us directly, whether we like it or not. You're exactly right. Fascism is a few

things but one of the things that fascism is, is a way to handle globalization.

Globalization is inevitable. It's just there. It's not the fault of you, it's not the fault of me -- it just so happens that we're living in a world together with lots of other people, with one economy which is linked in impossibly complicated ways and you can either face up to that, try to deal with that, say, "Okay, we're going to have policies which are going to minimize the inequality and maximize the opportunity and we're going to be real citizens about this," and to face up to it. Or, you can say, "Well, globalization is not really a condition, it's a conspiracy. It's not impersonal, it's personal, and here are the people."

And those people for the fascists were the Jews, usually, although not always exclusively. They can be the Jews now but they can also be -- it can be the Mexicans, it can be the Chinese, it can be the Muslims -- the way that this works, regardless of whether it's X, Y, Z, P, D, or Q, the way the politics works is once you start accepting that your neighbor is not your neighbor but is an element of a larger global conspiracy, then you stop being a citizen of the country and you start being what you think of as a defender of the virtues of your special group from this global threat.

As soon as you start thinking of your neighbor as someone you denounce as opposed to someone who's your fellow citizen or your neighbor, then you are taking part in the authoritarian regime change. Everybody knows this, right? I mean, everybody in the White House understands this. Even Mr. Trump understands this at some gut level and if we choose not to understand it, you know, then we're inviting problems. Yeah, and the globalist thing really is striking to me.

I spend a certain amount of time reading the Twitter feeds of people with whom I disagree and it's really striking how a lot of folks on the American Right talk about the globalism -- you know, which is an imagined conspiracy -- and they do it to the exclusion of real enemies -- of actual threats. So, I mean one

thing which is weird which is happening now is a lot of folks on the Right are spending their Twitter feeds talking about resisting globalism when there actually is a foreign enemy, you know? There's an enemy which has interfered in our elections and we're going to overlook real problems -- real threats -- you know, in order to create imaginably some kind of conspiracy. That's where we are right now.

JORDAN: Here's a question that I hadn't planned on asking but you're just the right guy for this. Russia in the '90s dipped into democracy and then got out of democracy pretty fast. I read a ton about Putin, it's one of my obsessions that doesn't seemingly have any connection to the things that we talk about here on the show, although it's starting to become so important that I can't ignore it. But the Russian system stabilizes inequality because it uses fear and scarcity etcetera to keep the status quo. And when we look at guys like Putin doing extreme things like blowing up apartment buildings inside Moscow using the security service to scare people into obedience, that stuff is -- not even just straight out of 1984, it's straight out 1984's -- the nightmares that people have in the book 1984.

Why is this model spreading? It seems like there's some obvious answer that I'm missing here. I mean, does Russia have to spread this negative, disastrous model? Because Russia isn't becoming more like Europe and the USA, they've got to somehow try to make the USA and Europe more like Russia? Is that the case and if so, why? How does that work?

TIMOTHY: No, I think you captured it pretty well. It's a little bit like in the 1990s we could think our institutions are going to spread from West to East. There's a kind of, you know -- a gravity to this. Things are going to slide from West to East, people are going to become more like us -- whether we've notices it or not, in the last 10 years, that see-saw is now tilting the other way and things are rolling down from East to West and many of the things, as we were talking about before with respect to the elections -- many of the things that have happened here in the

last year already happened in Russia, whether it was five years ago or 10 years ago or 20 years.

I think what's happened is that the current Russian regime recognizes A, that it can't actually reform the country or address the terrifying levels of economic inequality without losing their own grip and B, they can't bring Russia closer to Europe or the European model, again, without losing their grip. And rather than conceding defeat, they've done something which is very intelligent, which is to say, "We're going to deny that it can get any better." So this is how Russian authoritarianism is different from the big ideology of the 20th century.

The big ideology of the 20th century said, "There's some better world out there and we're going to get there," and they said, "Liberal democracy is irrelevant because liberal democracy is failing and it's much worse than these utopias we've got." What the Russian leadership says is, "No," -- what they're saying is, "Go watch Netflix." That's their ideology. Their ideology is, "You know what? Liberalism is a joke, democracy is a joke, it's all a -- trust is a joke, it's all a joke, there is no truth. That's the way they run things at home," and then once you -- if you win with that, if you can get the public to believe that then the next step is the public says, "Yeah, everything's a lie but we prefer our own lies to foreign lies," and that's this special form of postmodern nationalism.

So, you know the government is lying to you but you also believe -- and you think you're clever for believing this -- is that all governments always lie to everybody, so we might as well vote for our own lies, just like for our own soccer team. And so what Russian foreign policy tries to do is to spread that because insofar as their might be a democratic Ukraine, or insofar as their might be a democratic European Union or a democratic United States -- that's a threat to the existing model in Russia. So, they're quite intelligently trying to bring us down to their level and Mr. Trump is essentially the perfect instrument of this because Mr. Trump wants to be a Russian oligarch. That's

his great aspiration. He's a wannabe Russian oligarch. That's what they're doing and they do it not by spreading the ideology -- they spread lots of ideologies.

They spread contradictory ideologies, they pitch different stories to different people -- so, during their invasion of Ukraine they told the International Left that they were stopping fascism and, you know, stupid people bought that. And they told the International Right that they were stopping homosexuality and stupid people bought that. They were claiming to fight a war against, you know, fascist homosexuality. They weren't doing anything of the kind, they were just invading their neighbor.

They send out these contradictory narratives, very effectively with high production values, then at the end of the day they just kind of wink and nod and say, "Well maybe we're lying but everybody else is lying anyway," and if they can persuade us of that, and we all just watch Netflix and shrug our shoulders, then we will lose democracy and then they will win. I mean, that's not so much the point that they will win. Putin has his own problems and -- so all the people on the American Right who admire Russia, you should really go there and see how durable you think this system actually is. It's not so much important that they win, I mean what's important is that we lose. If we become like them, we become not only less free, but we're going to become a hell of a lot poorer very fast.

JORDAN: Yeah, I think that the folks who look at that and -- that side of the world and think, "Wow," you know, "they're doing a lot of things right." I remember when I was in law school, one of my friends who was Russian but had never lived there said something like, "This Putin guy, I admire him. He doesn't crap from anybody, he pushes his policies through, he doesn't care about what other people have to say and, you know, at some level, that's what Russians really needs. You know, none of this back of forth stuff that we're doing over here, that's for pansies. He's pushing these reforms through, he's not letting these guys get away with anything."

I really wish I could grab that guy and find him now and say, "What do you think of how that worked out for the last 15 or 20 years?" and I would have a feeling that since he reads the news, he probably has a slightly different opinion of how that shook out for his friends and family who are still stuck in Russia and probably don't want to be there at this point, especially being -- they were Jewish, they still live there, and he was planning to go visit them shortly after we graduated and I think he actually did. I'm wondering how happy and healthy those people are right now, especially not being connected to the government and things like that. It's just really scary. The more I read about Putin, the more I read about Russia, the scarier that whole place actually becomes.

TIMOTHY: Yeah, I mean, your point that people should really go there is very important. I mean, one historical analogy that occurs to me -- the International Right in Russia today is just a tiny bit like the International Left in the Soviet Union in the 1930s. People are drawn to an image of something but if they could spend a few weeks in the reality of it, it might be very useful to them, you know? So the International Right are just like the American alt-right, which loves Russia -- are they aware that Russia actually has a tremendous problem with its Muslim population, which we really don't? Are they aware that the way that Russia manages terrorism is by co-opting Muslim terrorists into the government? Are they aware, in general, what it would be like to live in a society where they're not free and where, you know, people even on the far Right will go in and out of prison at the whims of whoever has power? Are they aware just how annoying it is not to have the rule of law, not to be able to say what you want, not to be able to have your business, etcetera, etcetera?

But the other point of yours I wanted to return to is the success of Russia, which I think is quite temporary in managing inequality. Much of the system goes back to that, that Russia has terrifying levels of inequality and I think this is the element of the system which is attractive to Mr. Trump and his colleagues -- this notion that you really can't have a system

where a relatively small number of families controls tremendous majority of the national wealth and get society to put up with it. And part of the secret of getting society to put up with it is something which I would call this, like, sado-populism, where there's populism but the populism doesn't actually demand anything but the people. The populism is content to blame the rest of the world for our problems.

And the reason why I mention that is that this has been perfected in Russia. Standards of living in Russia are way down since Russia invaded Ukraine. Russia pointlessly invaded Ukraine. There was no point in invading Ukraine but it did make Russians a lot poorer. But, so long as Russians believe that they're taking part in some grand struggle against the American superpower yada, yada -- they're willing to put up with it, at least for a while. And you can see this in Mr.Trump's policies as well.

I mean, pretty much everything that actual policy is going to do is going to make people poor. If you lose Medicaid you're going to be poor, if you lose your health insurance you're going to be poor, if we have tax cuts that benefit the rich, then most Americans are just going to be poorer. Americans accept like, "Oh, well it's okay for us to be poorer because we're working against the international globalist conspiracy," or whatever it is, then we too start shading into this sado-populism where you take the pain because you think there's some international point to it. I hope that we're not going to get there, I believe that we won't but we are at the beginning of a trajectory that Russia has already gone much further along.

JORDAN: Tim, thank you so much. This has been very enlightening in kind of a scary way but sometimes those are the best shows so I really appreciate your time and I definitely appreciate this book. I will be giving away several copies of it because -- it's really short. I said this in the beginning of the show in the introduction. It's a short book. I think I read it in an hour and that was because I just sat down and did it. It was really easy, really interesting, it's got 20 little discreet lessons that you can

stop if you get interrupted by your kids or life and come right back to it. And it's pretty darn important and it becomes more and more important every single time I turn on the news, it seems.

TIMOTHY: Thanks so much for the conversation, I really appreciate it. It was a pleasure to talk to you, I hope we can do it again.

JORDAN: Well Jason, what do you think? Did we do it justice?

JASON: I think so. This was fascinating. I was listening along trying to take notes and do my usual job but I was just so sucked into the conversation, I may have missed a few.

JORDAN: Yeah it's -- he's well-spoken. The guy's writing is really, really good. It's something that I think is -- it's a very unfortunate necessity right now because we do, as Americans -- myself included in this -- think, "Oh, this can't happen here. This won't happen here. There's going to be institutions that will protect us. Eventually people will decide they've had enough or people who voted one way or the other way or are in positions of power will eventually say, 'To heck with this,' and they'll pull the emergency brake."

As we can see from historical examples, that's not always what happens and that, in itself, is actually quite terrifying. So, great big thank you to Timothy Snyder. The book title is *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*. Of course, that will be linked up in the show notes for this episode and if you enjoyed this one, don't forget to thank Timothy on Twitter. We'll have that linked in the show notes as well. Tweet at us your number one takeaway from Timothy Snyder. I'm @theartofcharm on Twitter and remember you can tap our album art in most mobile podcast players to see the show notes for this episode and we link to the show notes right on your phone.

I also want to encourage you to join us in our AoC challenge at theartofcharm.com/challenge or you can text the word

“charmed,” C-H-A-R-M-E-D to 33444. The challenge is about improving your networking and your connection skills and inspiring those around you to develop a personal and professional relationship with you. It’s free, it’s a great way to get the ball rolling -- in fact, that’s the whole idea. It’s a unisex challenge, of course, as well. It’s a fun way to get the ball rolling, get some forward momentum when it comes to relationship development and networking skills.

And we’ll email you our fundamentals Toolbox that I mentioned earlier on the show. That includes some great practical stuff, ready to apply, right out of the box on reading body language, having great nonverbal communication, the science of attraction, negotiation techniques, networking and influence strategies, persuasion tactics, and everything else that we teach here at The Art of Charm. It will make you a better networker, a better connector, and a better thinker. That’s theartofcharm.com/challenge or text the word “charmed,” C-H-A-R-M-E-D to 33444.

For full show notes for this and all previous episodes head on over to theartofcharm.com/podcast. This episode of AoC was produced by Jason DeFillippo, Jason Sanderson is our audio engineer and editor, and the show notes on the website are by Robert Fogarty. Theme music by Little People, transcriptions by TranscriptionOutsourcing.net -- I’m your host Jordan Harbinger. Go ahead, tell your friends because the greatest compliment you can give us is a referral to someone else, either shared in person or on the Web. Word of mouth is everything. So, share the show with your friends and your enemies. Stay charming and leave everything and everyone better than you found them.