Twitter Thread by Tim Wise



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1/ I'm not one for 'told ya so's but in 1989 when David Duke won the state House seat in Louisiana, some of us said this was an inflection point in American politics. This wasn't just the logical result of Reaganesque racial dog whistling. It was something different (a thread)...

2/ It wasn't even George Wallace, strictly speaking, though it was closer to that than Reagan. It was the blatant introduction of racist appeals under the guise of mainstream conservatism, and w/a polish and media-savvy Wallace lacked, as had most previous white supremacists...

3/ Duke knew how to use media. He cut 30 minute infomercials in his Senate run in 1990 — unheard of at the time — to slowly lay out his politics of racial resentment, knowing it would find a home w/white folks angered by previous GOP scapegoating of welfare, etc..

4/ ...but wanting to do more with it than just win an election. He wanted to turn mainstream racially-resentful conservatism into full blown white nationalism. And he knew it would take a while. He was grooming the electorate for what was to come....

5/ And yes, he lost in 90. But he got 60% of the white vote. I want to reiterate that. Six in ten whites in Louisiana voted for someone they all knew was a white supremacist. Indeed, a Nazi. And at the time, folks outside of Louisiana told us, "ah, that's just LA..."

6/ And in 1991 when he lost the Governor's race (even though he got 55% of the white vote) people were even more convinced, he was done and the politics he represented was done...They also insisted he was a geographically specific phenomenon...

6/ ...that wouldn't work elsewhere they said. LA has a "jungle primary" where everyone runs in a big group & the top two vote getters go to a runoff. That plays to extremism, they said. Other places, or national races with primaries would never fall for this kind of politic...

7/ But as my boss at the Louisiana Coalition (the group formed to stop Duke) said: Dukism was "cocaine politics." Addictive, deadly and easily transported across state lines. But folks didn't want to believe it. Louisiana (and the south perhaps) was just different...

8/ And then there were the white leftists who said we shouldn't focus on Duke's fascism or Nazism. Because that was no better than red baiting by the right against the left. We should just focus on his mainstream conservative appeals. He was no worse than Reagan they said...

9/ Or they insisted we should "go into the union halls and explain to white workers that the rich were the real enemy and racism had exploited all working people." Mmm-hmmm, ok precious. We explained (with evidence) that their understanding of the Duke phenomenon was juvenile...

10/ And again, that this was different; something immune to regular class-based appeals, whether from the left or from mainstream Democrats hoping a jobs bill or better economy would blunt its force. We insisted that anti racist politics must become the CENTER or progressivism...

11/ But again, we were ignored. And the monster grew, and bided its time. And Duke and others were early adopters of internet based forums and communication technologies. Duke, in 1996, was explaining on his website how the web would allow the proliferation of white nationalism..

12/ And he didn't even think in terms of social media at the time, but even just websites and listservs and chat boards were being exploited by the far right while the left was still printing out fucking pamphlets and newsletters...

13/ When Obama won and the Tea party emerged, the Duke types realized an opening to push a more fascist narrative with newbies to activism and right wing thinking. They deliberately infiltrated TP organizations and slowly built a more radicalized politic within them...

14/ All of which laid the groundwork for Trump: a guy who, like Duke, understood marketing. Even though Trump doesn't have the same commitment to nazism that Duke does, he knew how to brand a racist politic with plausible deniability in ways Duke (as a former Klansman) couldn't..

15/ Which was something we had also warned about literally 30 fucking years ago. And so here we are. So the lesson is, when folks tell you this is who we are as a nation, and this is what white folks do (at least enough to be dangerous), maybe listen, OK? Black folks told us...

16/ And some of us white folks, who were raised to listen to Black people, tried to tell everyone too...but our denial and obstinacy and perpetual faith in the country (utterly unjustified), made it impossible for people to hear it...we are paying the price for that now END

I should add as an addendum, that I forgot to mention the name of my boss at the Louisiana Coalition who saw all of this so clearly and instilled that understanding in me at a young age (21 and 22). It was Lance Hill. One of the most politically astute white people I ever knew

and who still tries to get people to listen to what we were saying three decades ago. He remains an inspiration to me, and someone without whom my own trajectory would have been impossible...and there are very few white folks who have meant that much to me. But Lance is one.