

The Neo-Liberal Personality: Charting the Rise of Donald Trump*

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“Behind the rise of every fascism is a failed revolution.” –Walter Benjamin

“The old world is dying and the new world struggles to be born. Now is the time of monsters.” –Antonio Gramsci

I want to begin by situating my comments within the context of a debate in the United States between liberal commentators on a perennial question in political theory: namely the connection between democracy and the kind of demagoguery represented by Trump (and, for some, Bernie Sanders from the left). This concern is one that goes back to Plato, as Andrew Sullivan suggests, in his invocation of the 5th century Greek philosopher in his much-discussed article in *New York Magazine*, that both Trump and Sanders are the logical outcomes of what he calls “hyper-democracy.”¹

This argument is most clearly articulated in Plato’s middle-period dialogue, the *Republic*,² a staple of introductory courses in political theory, often referred to as stretching “From Plato to NATO.” The argument in a nutshell is that, assuming a homology exists between the individual body and the body politic, the just or well-ordered state is like a just or well-ordered body—the mind or reason with the assistance of the spirit rules over the appetites. Similarly, in the well-ordered state, the philosophers rule, with the assistance of the military, over the acquisitive classes, those engaged in what the Greeks called *chrematistics* or what we today call economic activities; those, in other words, who now exhibit desire without end. Plato’s worry was that the lower orders would once again take power and put into place the very democratic order—the rule of the people

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or the *demos*—that put his friend and mentor Socrates to death for allegedly “corrupting the youth of Athens” by paying insufficient respect to the gods of the city. Plato held that only those who had established the proper order in themselves could establish a just order in the state as a whole.

This argument has played a key role in American democracy from the Founding Fathers through Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* to The Trilateral Commission’s diagnosis of the “crisis of democracy”—that the cause of the crisis was *too much* democracy leading to “ungovernability”³—to the Straussian⁴ neo-conservatives who effectively controlled the presidency under George W. Bush. It is, indeed, woven into the fabric of its political institutions such as the Electoral College, which is meant to protect against the possibility of a demagogue coming to power by exciting the masses. As Federalist Paper 68 states, the choice of representatives forming an Electoral College “will be much less apt to convulse the community with any extraordinary or violent movements, than the choice of ONE who was himself to be the final object of the public wishes. And as the electors, chosen in each State, are to assemble and vote in the State in which they are chosen, this detached and divided situation will expose them much less to heats and ferments, which might be communicated from them to the people, than if they were all to be convened at one time, in one place.”⁵ That the problem with the American Republic was the problem of too-much rather than too-little democracy.

In contrast to Sullivan, writers such as Jedediah Purdy writing in *Dissent*⁶ and Christopher Phelps writing in *Jacobin*⁷ challenge this view with two main arguments. The first is that Trump’s appeal amongst his largely white working class and less well-to-do middle class supporters has to do precisely with a lack of democracy and corresponding powerlessness (call it *hypo-* rather than *hyper-*democracy), to which Trump is implicitly appealing. The second argument is that, far from representing simply a form of left demagoguery, Sanders’ campaign (and one could say, by

extension, that of Jeremy Corbyn in the UK) represented a genuine attempt to present citizens with an expanded sphere of democracy, effectively giving them more control over their own destinies by, for example, making high education free and accessible, like many European countries in which it is considered a social good. In the process, such an extension of democracy would mitigate the proliferating sense of insecurity driving the successes of the far-right.

What is noteworthy in this particular narrative and counter-narrative of the US election is the absence of psychoanalytical categories to try to explain the particular appeal of the demagogue among the masses. In this sense, Sullivan's appeal to Plato falls short of Plato's own proto-psychoanalytical reflections as for example in his anticipation of Freud's account of relationship between id, ego, and super-ego in the metaphor of the Charioteer seeking to control the two steeds representing honour, on the one hand, and sensuous desire, on the other, at *Phaedrus*. As he argues in *Republic*, tyranny is the result of the revolt and triumph of the unrestricted appetites over spirited and rational aspects of the soul. Tyranny, Plato suggests, results from the unmediated release of the drives, made possible by the democratic form of rule. Freud called this the "return of the repressed." Today, of course, such a return threatens to seriously undermine not only the integrity of the US democratic system—such as it is—but also threatens to radically destabilize an already fragile and uncertain global order, not only in the South China Sea but also on Europe's eastern border with Russia, as well as in the Baltic region. It also promises an escalation in the arms race between the US and Russia.

In some other work that I have done, I tend to agree with psychoanalyst Jay Frankel's important work on Hungarian psychoanalyst, and one-time member of Freud's inner circle, Sandor Ferenczi's concept of the "identification with the aggressor."⁸ This is the idea that in a situation of profound emotional trauma involving a power imbalance, the victim, rather than standing up for

himself and on his own terms, offers an account of the nature of the trauma that tends to identify with and internalize the aggressor's account of events. Yet, I would also suggest that the difficulty of such an account is in moving from trauma at the level of the individual and trauma or crisis at the level of society as a whole. It is never society itself that is traumatized but rather the individuals who comprise it. Society, in other words, can never be psychoanalyzed and, therefore, treated by purely psychological means. "Therapy" can only be understood in terms of a transformed collective praxis, that the social relations constituted through our own activity undergo a thorough-going transformation such that we become not simply passive objects of social processes—for example exchange relationships—but, ultimately, genuine subjects.

One way of thinking about this is to return to the work of the early Frankfurt School, in particular, the work of Erich Fromm, on the "authoritarian" or the sadomasochistic personality type. Fromm's work represents a thorough-going attempt to bring social theory together with psychoanalysis. The Frankfurt School did the most by thinking of the connection between *failed revolutions and fascism*. The idea here is that in response to massive social transformation and dislocation, as, for example, coursed through Europe in the early modern period, one witnesses an increase in "freedom" insofar as the bonds of the old order are progressively dissolved. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels describe this beautifully in the *Communist Manifesto* in terms of "all that is solid...melting into air." But such liberation is not an unmixed blessing: it leads precisely to a sense of meaninglessness insofar as traditional forms of authority are no longer available to the individual for orientation. In other words, there are no "secondary bonds" available to replace the "primary bonds" of familial intimacy and maternal love, and recognizing this also leads to the individual's sense of loneliness and dislocation or what Durkheim called "anomie." As Erich Fromm explains:

But while in many respects the individual has grown, has developed mentally and emotionally, and participates in cultural achievements in a degree unheard of before, the lag between “freedom from” and “freedom to” has grown too. The result of this disproportion between freedom from any tie and the lack of possibilities for the positive realization of freedom and individuality has led, in Europe, to a panicky flight from freedom into new ties or at least into complete indifference.⁹

A revolutionary transformation of social relations would be precisely the establishment of structures that could meaningfully replace the lost primary bonds by giving individuals real control over their own fate through an institutionalized conception of autonomy. In this sense, revolutionary transformation represents the culmination of the Enlightenment ideal as articulated most clearly as the emergence from “self-incurred tutelage” or, as Freud puts it, “Wo Es war, Ich soll werden” or “Where id is there ego shall be.”

There is precisely the paradox, here, of the fact that while the old order is rich in meaning but poor in freedom, the new order that is coming into being is comparatively richer in freedom, insofar as the old order, and its ascriptive roles and orientations have weakened, and the space for autonomous action has widened, yet the meaningfulness of life is profoundly fragile. It is here that Antonio Gramsci’s words, written during the rise of 20th century fascism, ring true: “The old world is dying and the new world struggles to be born. Now is the time of monsters.”

During the upheavals of the early modern period, we find “idiocy” in the sense of what Marx called “idiocy of rural life,” by which he meant not “stupidity” but social isolation. The masses, therefore, become susceptible to the appeal of subordination to authoritarian power—the cruel judgment of the Puritan God who arbitrarily consigns souls to salvation or damnation with no reference to their “works.” Marx captures the ambiguous meaning of the expansion of negative freedom resulting from the transformation of the old feudal order when he notes how workers, now liberated from the means of production, namely the commons, are “free to drag their hides to

the market where they are sure to get a hiding.” At the risk of a historical generalization, the English working class can be said to be characterized by struggles, on the one hand, to shorten the working day, for greater political and social rights, in a word positive freedom, and, on the other—particularly in late 19th century—a deferential subordination to the bourgeois order in return for a stake in the “White Man’s burden.” This made them particularly susceptible to the deeply racist appeals of Margaret Thatcher at the very origins of neoliberalism and were—the Miners notwithstanding—quite happy to “drag their hides to the market.” As I will get to in a moment, our situation today parallels early modern Europe in terms of the very high levels of social upheaval and dislocation associated with neoliberal globalization. It is no surprise that authoritarian movements and tendencies are on the rise in this country, as well as the Philippines, Hungary, Poland, Britain, Russia, and, now especially, the United States.

This fusion of deference to the powerful and the enjoyment of power over others is the essence of the “Authoritarian Personality.” Trump exemplifies such a personality type in his much-discussed narcissism and his bullying behaviour—most clearly evinced in his mimicking the NYT reporter Serge Kovalevsky. It is also very clearly evinced in his egging on of his supporters in some of his rallies to violence against demonstrators and, in some cases, reporters by suggesting, remarkably, that he would personally pay their legal fees if they were charged by the police. I think we can understand the advent of neoliberalism as another crisis period in which there is tremendous social upheaval and dislocation. This has been described, for example, by Naomi Klein as a form of shock therapy,¹⁰ and David Harvey as consisting of a redoubled form of primitive accumulation (or what he calls “accumulation by dispossession”) and upward redistribution of wealth combined with deregulation and privatization;¹¹ as a result, citizens are made ever more responsible for their own fates—everyone becomes their own entrepreneur but stripped of the capital, material, and

culture with which to do so, and ever more in debt. Berkeley political theorist, Wendy Brown, understands this as the displacement of *homo politicus*, political man, by *homo economicus*, the self-responsible entrepreneur who is both capitalist and capital in one.¹² Social *insecurity* literally attends the dismantling of the *social security* framework of the welfare state. Indeed, the former head of the US Federal Reserve, Alan Greenspan, held that it was government policy to actually create the conditions of economic insecurity to boost labour productivity.

So, it is possible to argue that such conditions of dislocation and isolation are conditions ripe for authoritarianism (let's also recall how important isolation and loneliness are in Arendt's account of the origins of totalitarianism, as well as in de Tocqueville's earlier account of American democracy). With the destruction and upheaval resulting from the globalization of production relations from roughly the mid-1970s, individuals are increasingly susceptible to anxiety (or what Zygmund Bauman calls "liquid fear"¹³) that results, above all, from economic precariousness. Let's remember how today the watchword of economic innovation is "creative disruption," which has mainly occurred through transformations in the digital economy by way of companies operating in the so-called sharing economy such as Uber, Airbnb, and the like. But it has also resulted in online Bulletin Boards such as 4-Conn, the incubator of the so-called Alt-right. The latter has become a magnet for disaffected young, white males who, against the backdrop of a perceived rise in the status and power of women, people of colour, and gays and lesbians, feel profoundly threatened and anxious about the future.¹⁴

Contemporary right-wing populism can be understood in terms of the transformation of anxiety, which is always amorphous and objectless, into fear, which centers on a particular object as its source. In other words, right-wing populism constructs the "people" by way of as it were, solidifying liquid fear, that is, transforming *generalized* anxiety into the fear of a *particular* other.

Where in the middle of the last century we witness the culmination of centuries-long demonization of the Jew as the other, today we witness the way in which the Muslim or the refugee is in place of the figure of the Jew. They are both, nonetheless, “strangers” in Simmel’s memorable description, as “he who comes from afar but who stays close to home.”¹⁵

How are we to understand neoliberalism more precisely? One way is by understanding its similarities and differences with neoconservatism—since classical Burkean conservatism is often the particularistic foil against which to understand the universalism inherent in liberalism’s commitment to the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity that manifested in the French Revolution, with a distinct emphasis on the first rather than second and third ideals. A neoconservative, according to the famous quip of Irving Kristol, is a “liberal who has been mugged by reality.” More seriously, though, neoconservatism can be understood as a political philosophy that emerged as a response to the pragmatism and realism of Henry Kissinger and Zbigniew Brzezinski, and was largely formulated by the followers of Leo Strauss, such as Irving and William Kristol, Donald Rumsfeld, and Paul Wolfowitz. Taking its inspiration from the Mujahideen victory against the Soviets in the 1980s, eschewing the realist emphasis on global order and shared security through interdependence, the neoconservatives sought directly to confront “tyrannical” regimes by supposedly helping the people to overthrow these regimes and, in the process, pursue US foreign policy objectives. This was the doctrine of regime change and has since played itself out in Iraq and Libya, and has been derailed in Syria, not least because of Russian involvement. Neoconservatism can, then, be succinctly defined in terms of the liberation of polities.

Neoliberalism has a longer lineage and, institutionally, can be traced back to the formation of the Mount Pellerin society in the immediate postwar period by such figures as Karl Popper, Friedrich Hayek, and Milton Friedman.¹⁶ Its aim was to reinstitute neoclassical economics by

means of rolling back the various supposedly irrational “externalities” of the state. It sought, for example, to reduce, if not eliminate altogether, various regulations pertaining to health and safety, the environment, labour laws protecting free collective bargaining, etc. It also sought to reduce the burden placed, for example by taxation, on capital. With the socio-economic crisis of the mid-1970s—the so-called crisis of *stagflation* (declining levels of growth *plus* inflation)—advocates of what came to be known as neoliberalism found the opening they needed to launch an attack on the then reigning Keynesian orthodoxy, which held that the basic contradiction of capitalism could be addressed by managing demand. If neoconservatism sought to liberate *homo politicus*, the citizen, then neoliberalism sought to liberate *homo economicus*. One of the early possible intersections of what would come to be known as neoconservatism and neoliberalism—although, of course, occurring under the arch realist Kissinger’s watch—was Chile, where a democratically elected socialist government was overthrown by a brutal military dictatorship and the country became a kind of living laboratory for the application of neoliberal economic doctrine.¹⁷ If neoconservatism sought the liberation of polities, is it safe to say that neoliberalism sought, then, to liberate markets?

Well, no, it is not. Just as neoconservatism only rhetorically sought to liberate subject populations from tyrannical dictatorships, as the examples of Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya show, neoliberalism cannot so straightforwardly be understood simply as a liberation of markets. Rather, as I shall suggest, it is the deepening of a form of rationality that leads to the effacement of the citizen by *homo economicus*. And this has meant much more than a liberation of the market. Rather, it has led to the production of a new kind of subject. Both neoconservatism as a foreign policy of liberating polities and neoliberalism as a policy of liberating markets can be said to be based on fear.

For neoconservatism, fear of the external enemy is no longer a way of organizing foreign policy in terms of the overall stability of a global order, as in Kissinger's approach, but to mobilize a population against an external enemy through a division of the world into "good" and "evil" forces. This enemy was jihadism after 1998, but especially 2001. For neoliberalism, anxiety results from the destruction of the social security infrastructure of the Keynesian welfare state that produces massive social dislocation and insecurity. The *intersection* between these two discourses, which are simultaneously ideas, policies, and practices, is toxic and, indeed, quite lethal. It was toxic precisely because in those states that pursued neoliberal, domestic policies such as the US, the UK, and, to a lesser extent, Canada, neoconservative foreign policies were also adopted. This intersection, then, culminated in the transformation of the external enemy from the USSR in the wake of the Cold War to the Islamic world. From the clash of ideologies to "clash of civilizations."¹⁸

Right-wing populist movements are able to transform the social stranger into the political enemy by directing growing anger and frustration arising from socio-economic exclusion, marginalization, and dislocation at outsider groups. We have just seen this play itself out in the recent Brexit vote in the United Kingdom and, of course, in the recent election of Donald Trump as the 45th President of the US. Both have successfully transformed general amorphous social anxieties into fear and loathing of the "other."

According to the important study by Leo Lowenthal and Norbert Guterman, *Prophets of Deceit*,¹⁹ it is in this context that the figure of the "agitator" plays such a crucial role in allowing the fears and frustrations that arise from such conditions of dislocation to find expression. Lowenthal and Guterman compare the agitator, on the one hand, with the revolutionary and, on the other, with the reformist. All three figures, in contrast with the apologists of the establishment,

draw attention to social discontent (Freud's "Unbehagen"), yet while the revolutionary and reformist seek to provide an "objective account" of the cause of such discontent, fears, and frustrations, the agitator suggests that the cause of these can be attributed to a social group that is, in the process, constituted as the enemy. The agitator then tacitly endorses attacks on these groups. The agitator does not want his followers to think too much (I love the "uneducated," Trump declares with aplomb). In the post-war period, these enemies were Communists, bankers, and Jews (the former two identified with the latter); while today, there has been a not unambivalent shift in the image of the enemy, to which I shall return. In contrast, the reformers and revolutionaries provide not only an account of the sources of social discontent, but also programs to ameliorate or fundamentally alter those conditions.

How can we understand the election of Donald Trump in these terms? As a Yale-educated lawyer, member of the Watergate Commission, former First Lady—who, for a period, was responsible for the first attempt at a single-payer health care system—former Senator for New York, and Secretary of State, Hillary Rodham Clinton is clearly the establishment candidate. Hence, rather than acknowledging the problems of politics as usual, she has taken on the task of minimizing the sense of grievance amongst a vast majority of Americans and seeking to reduce their expectations. In fact, Clinton virtually ignored the so-called rust belt of the United States, which was taken to be a clear disregard of working-class Americans whom globalization had thrown into conditions of misery.

Against this, Trump, who said chillingly, in fact, that the GOP would be transformed into a "workers" party, was able to successfully position himself very much as the agitator outside of the political establishment who is now giving vent to the frustrations and fears of his followers. Interestingly, he claims outsider status on the basis of knowing the establishment "from the inside."

True to the form of the agitator, rather than providing an objective account of the nature of global capitalism, in particular the growing power of financial capital, he blames specific groups for the ills facing a US in abject decline, a US that is no longer “great.” He blames the Chinese, the Iranians, and the Mexicans, and, of course, also implicitly and, occasionally, explicitly authorizes hatred and violence against these and other groups, such as African Americans during his rallies. Indeed, his speech on foreign policy in late April struck a decidedly Schmittian note, consisting of a critique of Obama’s foreign policy for either not defining its objectives in terms of the opposition of friend and foe or of getting the opposition exactly wrong: i.e. taking Israel for foe and Iran for friend. But the most important move that Trump makes in this speech is to define the enemy as the Islamist (reprising Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” thesis)—this is the moment at which foreign and domestic policy (the “over there” and the “over here”) meet and enables Trump to galvanize his base. Again, this is precisely where the policy objectives of neoconservatism and the socially destabilizing effects of neoliberalism coalesce. This is how Trump solidifies liquid fear.

It is here that Trump is able to project the swagger of strength—one that sees water boarding as too mild and suggests the possibility of targeting the families of terrorists for extrajudicial death. The followers’ masochistic subordination to Trump is accompanied by the authorization of sadistic violence against the other portended, for example, Trump’s mockery of the disabled reporter, and, even more worryingly, a threat of violence at the Republican National Convention. More subtly, his authoritarianism is present in reference to Megan Kelly’s menstruation or Hillary Clinton’s bathroom breaks as “disgusting.” Empirical social psychology has shown a correlation between authoritarian attitudes and heightened sensitivity to abject or “disgusting” phenomena such as bodily fluids, excreta, or insects. And, while relatively unremarked, it is possible to see on his reality TV show, *The Apprentice*, Trump’s encouragement

(often fully made good upon) of, on the one hand, a vicious attitude of “dog eat dog,” and, on the other, an obsequious subordination to the figure of Trump himself. In many cases, the individuals fired are those who try to speak what they consider to be the truth of the situation and are punished for it because they fail to engage in the requisite self-preservation through self-assertion. To survive and thrive within this environment one must, indeed, “identify with the aggressor” who, while suggesting an anti-establishment posture, simply works to further entrench the establishment’s power.

My last point is about Sanders. While he considers himself (and his followers) to be making a “political revolution,” which it well may be, Sanders was not attempting to lead a socio-economic one. As Chomsky has pointed out, Sanders is a New Dealer or, in other words, a reformer according to the schema I presented. And indeed, we can see that he is attempting to foster a discussion of the larger structural problems within the US economy, particularly the power of the banking sector, the racist prison-industrial complex created by the US state, the conditions of Native Americans, and so on. And, indeed, as the example of his response to Black Lives Matters activists in Seattle showed, he is willing to learn (dialogically and dialectically from them). This is exactly why it is not possible, as per Andrew Sullivan, to state that Sanders is simply a left-wing version of Trump. While he does not outline, in my view at least, the kind of far-reaching democratic reforms that Purdy suggests, he does, I think, intimate that these are necessary. Returning to the theme of the escape from the *negative* form of freedom that Fromm sees as leading to an uncritical self-subordination to authority (authoritarianism), what Sanders suggests is the possibility that citizens must gain more control over their destinies by creating new spaces for political participation (this was also the promise of Occupy and Arab Spring) in a new regime of *positive* freedom. If authoritarianism entails what Theodor W. Adorno aptly calls “psychoanalysis

in reverse,” aiming at assisting the drives to circumvent the rational, reality-testing ego, then progressive movements such as Bernie Sanders, and Jeremy Corbyn in the UK, can be understood as aligning with the aims of psychoanalysis to bring to consciousness what is unconscious in a reconfigured form of practical reason.

Notes

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- ¹ Andrew Sullivan, “Democracies End When They Are Too Democratic,” <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2016/04/america-tyranny-donald-trump.html>
- ² Plato, *The Republic*, in *Collected Dialogues*, Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961): 575-844.
- ³ http://trilateral.org/download/doc/crisis_of_democracy.pdf
- ⁴ Straussians hold that there is one teaching, an exoteric one, for the masses that grounds authority in revealed truth and its guardians, the family and so on, and one teaching, an esoteric one, for the elite, in which authority is said to be grounded in “will to power.” This is the Straussian response to the Platonic problem of tyranny.
- ⁵ http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/fed68.asp
- ⁶ “What Trump’s Rise Means for Democracy,” https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/andrew-sullivan-trump-concern-trolling-for-democracy
- ⁷ “From Slump to Trump,” <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/05/trump-working-class-white-voters-small-business/>
- ⁸ See Jay Frankel “Exploring Ferenczi’s Concept of Identification with the Aggressor: Its Role in Trauma, Everyday Life, and the Therapeutic Relationship,” *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 12:101-139 (2002). Samir Gandesha, “Identifying with the Aggressor: The Neo-Liberal Personality,” Lecture delivered at the Freud Museum, London, UK, January, 2016.
- ⁹ Erich Fromm, *Escape From Freedom*, (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 1994): 37.
- ¹⁰ Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2007).
- ¹¹ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
- ¹² Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neo-liberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2015).
- ¹³ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Fear* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006).
- ¹⁴ Cf. <http://www.cbc.ca/radio/thecurrent/features/disruptors>
- ¹⁵ Georg Simmel, “The Stranger,” From Kurt Wolff (Trans.) *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, Kurt Wolff (trans.) (New York: New York: Free Press, 1950): 402 - 408.
- ¹⁶ Daniel Stedman Jones, *Masters of the Universe: Hayek, Friedman and the Birth of Neoliberal politics* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2012).
- ¹⁷ See also Brown’s excellent account in *Undoing the Demos*, 142-151, of the way in which post-invasion Iraq, the state was thoroughly restructured along neoliberal lines.
- ¹⁸ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011).
- ¹⁹ *Prophets of Deceit*, <http://www.ajcarchives.org/main.php?GroupingId=6530>