

Suffering, the Other, and a Vote for Trump

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As the current political environment in the United States swings towards a totalitarian orientation (Arendt, 1948/2004; Ellenberger, 1970; Sullivan, 2016; Williams, Z. 2017; Williams, R. 2016), it is important to critically examine the dialectic between politics and psychoanalysis. Goggin and Goggin (2000) were correct to point out that the relevant question is not only how political should psychoanalysis be in practice, if at all, but also, “What conditions in a society or political system nurture and support the profession and practice of psychoanalysis, and what conditions hinder it?” They and others, such as Danto (2005), demonstrate that it thrived in liberal to socialist leaning environments, where it was free to offer its services to all, regardless of race, religion, and economic status, where academic environments were inclusive and accessible, and where healthcare, including mental healthcare, was widely available (Danto, 2005). On the flip-side, it suffered in fascist and authoritarian regimes (Goggin & Goggin, 2000; Kuriloff, 2013). Regardless of the challenges psychoanalysis might face in coming years, the unconscious mind cannot now be un-thought. The idea of internal motivational forces contained within but beyond the control of the body, whether an individual body or a societal body, will persist into an uncertain future.

Psychoanalysis for Peace

Regarding what effect the discovery of the unconscious mind would have upon human nature and politics, early psychoanalysts were quite hopeful. They imagined a world in which drives were recognized and provided with appropriate outlets, allowing creativity and harmony to flourish (Goggin & Goggin, 2001; Danto, 2005), in addition to simply creating a political body capable of loving and working without neurotic misery. Curiously, in the 1932 correspondence between Albert Einstein and Sigmund Freud titled “Why War?” (Einstein, Freud & Gilbert, 1939), Freud seemed to sell his own theories short. He seemed to forget the assertions he had made in *Future of an Illusion* (1927) and *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930) regarding the constant tension between drives and civilization, and to settle instead into a comfortable notion of inevitable evolutionary progress. Einstein wrote to ask Freud what the study of psychoanalysis could offer towards world peace. In his words, “Is it possible to control man’s mental evolution so as to make him proof against the psychoses of hate and destructiveness?” (Einstein, Freud & Gilbert, 1939, p. 4).

In his response, Freud begins by asserting the existence of two constant, interactive, and unavoidable drives, libido and aggression. He goes on to situate the instincts and will of the individual in opposition to civilization, as he described in *Totem and Taboo* (1913). To deal with this, a different form of violence, called law, evolved with human societies to keep individuals in check. However, an opposing force, identification, love, and a sense of community, also works to hold nations together. It is a Romantic notion; the same innate forces that struggle for primacy within the individual also duel at the societal level. Fear of violent retaliation by the law, as well as genuine affection, work in tandem to inhibit destructive libidinal and violent impulses of both the individual and the masses. Freud writes, “There is no use in trying to get rid of men’s aggressive inclinations,” however, “Anything that encourages the growth of emotional ties between men must operate against war,” (Einstein, Freud & Gilbert, 1939, p. 11). Freud did not often speak of empathy (Christoff & Dauphin, 2018; Agosta, 2014), and neither did he in this

correspondence. Talk of empathy has played a prominent role, on the other hand, in current political discussions. In this letter, Freud focused on identification as the source of emotional ties. The warm feelings of similarity he alludes to resemble a form of nationalism. If words were put to this form of identification, they might run, “You are like me. I am good, so you are good. It’s good for us to be good together, and our goodness together is better than even our separate goodness.” This self-centered emotional closeness is quite distinct from the reaching-into practice of empathy. I will return to the discourse of empathy in current politics below.

Continuing with Freud’s response to Einstein, at the moment when a reader of Freud might expect a fresh idea that would illuminate the topic, he asks, “Why do you and I and so many other people rebel so violently against war?” (Einstein, Freud, & Gilbert, 1939, p. 12). This flies in the face of his previous assertion that on both an individual and societal level the aggressive drive is inescapable. Manageable, capable of sublimation, perhaps, but nomothetically present. Freud’s question to Einstein introduces the idea that, while some people reject war, others thrive on it, and that there is an innate difference between these types of people. Alternatively, perhaps Freud suggests that, although some people must still struggle with violent impulses, their impulses could not result in war, whereas the impulses of other may. It is puzzling and unclear. Freud explains,

For incalculable ages mankind has been passing through a process of evolution of culture. (Some people, I know, prefer to use the term ‘civilization.’) We owe to that process the best part of what we have become, as well as a good part of what we suffer from... The psychical modifications... consist in a progressive displacement of instinctual aims and a restriction of instinctual impulses... Of the psychological characteristics of civilization two appear to be the most important: a strengthening of the intellect, which is beginning to govern instinctual life, and an internalization of the aggressive impulses, with all its consequent advantages and perils. Now war is in the crassest opposition to the psychical attitude imposed on us by the process of civilization, and for that reason we are bound to rebel against it; we simply cannot any longer put up with it... And how long shall we have to wait before the rest of mankind becomes pacifists too? There is no telling. But it may not be Utopian to hope that these two factors, the cultural attitude and the justified dread of the consequences of a future war, may result within a measurable time in putting an end to the waging of war. (Einstein, Freud & Gilbert, 1939, pp. 13-14)

Freud forgets to ask himself, once internalized, where do those aggressive impulses go? He pays lip service to, but quickly forgets, the perils of internalized aggression. Surely, according to his own theory, these internalized impulses will present as symptoms of anxiety? He ends reiterating the comforting note that anything which would increase a sense of identification might prevent war, “what fosters the growth of a civilization works at the same time against war,” (Einstein, Freud & Gilbert, 1939, p.13) but leaves his future readers to puzzle how humans might become pacifists without relying on a passive notion of cultural evolution to account for such a fundamental shift.

Analyzing the Moment

I have taken care to set the stage for my treatment of current American politics due to the many parallels between the European inter-war period and present-day United States. There are periods in American history whose recognition is also necessary to understanding the current moment, including the post-civil war era (1865-1900) and the civil rights era (1950-1963) (Library of Congress, 2017; Gilder Lehrman Institute, 2017). One common thread among these

various periods is the preoccupation with race and high levels of white nationalism. During the interwar period in Europe, centuries of anti-Semitic discrimination and persecution were rapidly coming to an apex (Arendt, 1948/2004). Similarly, in current United States politics, centuries of anti-Black discrimination and persecution, and post 9-11 anti-Muslim prejudice, are rapidly becoming prominent (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016; Row, 2016). Another similarity between Freud's 1932 letter on the role of the unconscious mind in politics and the pre-election period of 2016 is the mood of complacent optimism felt by much of the American public prior to November 8th, 2016 (Shahani, 2016; Scharmer, 2016). Everyone, even Donald Trump's supporters, woke on November 9th to a different world, and felt shock (Stanage, 2016). Countless web-pages and news articles since have scrambled to excavate and dissect the turbulent campaign season leading to the election, and to answer the question, "How did this happen?" Not only how, but also, "Why?" (Pew Research Center, 2016).

How can psychoanalytic thought be brought to bear on understanding this political moment? The election of Donald Trump to the office of President of the United States was a surprising unknown, and was accomplished with the votes of a mere 27% of the eligible voting population (Brilliant Maps, 2016). In this sense, his potential victory was, like an impulse arising from the dynamic unconscious, obscured from conscious recognition, until it broke through in the form of an undeniable symptom. Upon recognition of the symptom, reflection of the time preceding its arrival ensues, and signs become apparent in hindsight. Also like a symptom in the psychoanalytic sense, it was, in actuality, enacted by the ego, the self. Whether ego-dystonically or ego-syntonically, despite falling short of winning the popular vote, Trump was voted into office by the American body politic. His opposition bears responsibility for his election in the same way Ernst Lanzer opened his door nightly to allow the ghost of his father to enter (Freud, 1909). In the same way a dissociated aspect of self is nevertheless responsible for the actions of the individual, so is it incumbent on the political body to allow entry to its disavowed aspects, in order to know itself (Sullivan, 1953; Stolorow, 1992; Bromberg, 1998).

An invitation to reach into and understand the motivations of Trump voters as well as those who opposed him, which resulted in his election, need not equate to providing a platform for hate, although careful attention to the distinction is essential. Taking a critical approach to explore current politics, authors may imagine themselves in the role of the psychoanalyst during a psychoanalytic treatment, creating a space of reflective self-curiosity in the analysand (Winnicott, 1971). In the process, it will be wise to follow Kohut's (1971) advice, and to align oneself with the ego of the analysand, rather than the split-off aspect of the self. The purpose of analysis, after all, is to fortify the ego, to lead the analysand towards an honest encounter with negative affect and disavowed self-states, without becoming subsumed by the id or dissolving into psychosis. In Winnicottian terms, a critical approach to the outcome of the 2016 election would provide a holding space in which to process previously dissociated affect, while refusing to allow the analyst to be destroyed in the process (Winnicott, 1969). In this case, the ego of the United States is its reasonableness, its better nature, its hopefulness, its Statue of Liberty, its American Dream. The ego to align with is the assertion that the country will not fall from its state of democratic grace to dangerous authoritarianism, fascism, or oligarchy. These values are shared by those in all major political parties, and by individuals who voted for all presidential candidates.

Deep-Rooted Malaise

A model for such an endeavor is to be found in the joint effort of the Frankfurt School and the American Jewish Committee in their five volume *Studies in Prejudice* series (1949-1950), edited by Horkheimer and Flowerman. The project was led primarily by Jewish intellectuals who, having been forced to flee Europe during the Holocaust, turned a critical eye to their new residence, the United States. The volumes included contributions from Adorno, Bettelheim, Lowenthal, and Marcuse, among others. Recognizing that eugenics and anti-Semitism were far from localized to WWII Germany, and were instead global trends, they sought to study various aspects of those trends in American culture (Stern, 2005; Vasquez, 2016, 2017). Notable contributions of these volumes include “the f-scale,” a personality scale measuring a subject’s propensity towards authoritarian or fascist ideas and values. While the scale presented serious psychometric concerns, it is meaningful that the authors explored the personalities of the population for the origins of authoritarian regimes, rather than focusing solely on top-down power structures. This theme of looking into the suffering and frustration of the people to explain the rise of populist leaders continued into the 5th volume, “*Prophets of Deceit: A Study of the Techniques of the American Agitator*” (Lowenthal & Guterman, 1949/1970).

An in-depth analysis of the similarities between *Prophets of Deceit* and the rise of Donald Trump following the announcement of his candidacy would be a timely endeavor, for which there is not room in this essay. A few points of Lowenthal and Guterman’s analysis, however, are key to this discussion. The agitator aligns himself with the “deep rooted malaise” of the struggling, unsatisfied people (Marcuse, introduction to Lowenthal & Guterman, 1970, p. viii). “The agitator’s themes are a distorted version of genuine social problems,” (p. 139). The agitator gains the trust of the people by positioning them as part of an in-group, “like someone arising from its midst to express its innermost thoughts,” (p. 5) which requires the creation of a threatening enemy out-group. He presents as an “indefatigable businessman,” (p. 117). The agitator refers to his enemies as vermin, especially rats. In dehumanizing and setting out to destroy the out-group, the agitator says publicly what others think privately (p. 124), and has every intention of making good on his promises to go after the enemy. In the end, however, “for all his emphasis on and expression of discontent, the agitator functions objectively to perpetuate the conditions which give rise to that discontent,” (p. 140). Lowenthal and Guterman recognize that, despite being an accurate and informative study, their volume offers no solutions to resisting an agitator, should one arise.

There are various levels of malaise and genuine social problems that contributed to Trump’s rise to power. Among his core voting constituency, “the Forgotten People,” (Gage, 2017), there is a specific and deep suffering. Rural white communities with the highest drug, alcohol, and suicide mortality rates, also with high unemployment rates, were also the biggest supporters of Trump in the 2016 election (Monnat, 2016). Monnat (2016) likens the complex picture of economics, drug dependence, and death rate to a measure of “despair,” and notes that the communities with the highest level of “deaths of despair” were also the strongest supporters of Trump nation-wide. Some of these same communities have seen a sharp increase in newborns with neonatal opioid addiction (Mostafavi, 2016), which is increasing at a rate 80% higher than in urban areas. But poor whites were not the only Trump supporters. He found support in all geographic areas, among all income brackets, all levels of education, including 53% of all white women (Lett, 2016; Sasson, 2016). Rather than the white women’s vote being a response to a specific suffering, it seemed to seek to negate the suffering of Black women and women and color (Lasha, 2016; McDonough, 2016). Women of color felt betrayed by the white women who voted for Trump (Obie, 2017), seeing their votes as both a refusal to stand up for their civil rights

and a willful ignorance of issues of race in feminism that have been long discussed by Black and Latinx feminists (Lorde, 1984; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015). White women who voted for Trump identified with his call to Make America Great Again, and they felt the sense of personal deprivation implicit in the slogan. Responding to suggestion, they unconsciously imagined themselves as the real Americans who had lost something they deserved (Kurtzleben, 2017; Gurr, 1970). Lowenthal and Guterman (1949/1970) identified the psychology in this positive identification as simple Americans, real Americans, or forgotten people: “In the characterization real Americans the abstract adjective real barely conceals the negative meaning of non-real. What the agitator implies is that his adherents are all those who do not fall under any of the categories of the enemy. His elite or in-group is essentially negative; it depends for definition on those in the out group,” (p. 108). In context of the 2016 election and victory period, Trump’s forgotten people were non-Black, non-Latinx, non-Arab, non-Muslim, non-Jewish, non-women, non-LGBTQ, and non-immigrant. The negation of difference was celebrated with giant Christmas trees (Sharp, 2016; Birnbaum & Liptak, 2016). Christian male whiteness was reinstated as the invisible standard against which all difference was thrown in sharp relief (Hall, 1992; Haraway, 1988). It is reflected in Trump’s choice of cabinet members and appointed officials (McCarthy, 2017). White suffering, in this context, took precedence over current and historical Black suffering (DuVernay, 2016; BLM, 2016). Trump invited the assertion and voicing of white suffering, which included a silencing and whitewashing of Black suffering, immigrant suffering, and Native American suffering (Donnella, 2016; Sammon, 2016). In this election cycle, racism trumped the outward elements of progress towards inclusivity.

Shaun King, a prominent Black Lives Matter activist and historian, situates Trump’s rise and election as the response of a historically racist country to its first Black president (University of Michigan, 2017). Like a reaction formation, having allowed love for a Black father figure to surface to consciousness, and this affection being so anxiety provoking, a surge of reactionary fear and hatred overcompensates. Reporter Van Jones, on election night, referred to this reaction formation-like phenomenon as “whitelash,” (Cama, 2016). Following a period of expansion of civil rights to LGBTQ people, increased access to healthcare for low-income people and minorities, and increasing discourse surrounding gender and racial inequality during the Obama administration, the country elected a leader who is explicitly racist (O’Connor, 2016), sexist (Cohen, 2017), xenophobic (Sargent, 2016), and ableist (Baer, 2016). As though global atrocities following the first world war from the Holocaust to the genocide in Syria were not enough to disprove Freud’s (1939) optimism regarding a natural evolution of civilization, the election of Trump as the 45th president of the United States can be described as a national return of the repressed (Freud, 1933). The 2016 election shows that, contrary to a passive evolutionary process, dynamic forces continue to operate and influence the course of history, despite the effort of methods such as psychoanalysis and activist movements to shape history in the direction of progress (Coates, 2015; Davis, 2016). Moving from an exploration of the psychology of a nation to an individual, a case example demonstrates how dynamic unconscious forces can influence political acts.

Case Material

Aidan is a 20-year-old white college student majoring in mechanical engineering. He attends a 4-year commuter university in the Midwest. His parents, with whom he lives, are very religious Baptists of lower-middle income. Aidan presented for treatment to address moderate self-harm and suicidal ideation. He started cutting during high school, and it has persisted

through his two and a half years of college. Aidan is conscientious, agreeable, and thoughtful. In the course of therapy, Aidan has identified that his urges to self-harm arise from feelings of unbearable guilt when he fears he may have emotionally hurt his friends. The cutting, when it occurs, provides relief, but generates more guilt, as he is letting down those who he has promised he would stop cutting, those who care about him most. Aidan's care for his loved others is ego-syntonic and a source of pride. He has a special non-sexual relationship with a woman his age who he has known since childhood, Ramona. Ramona is the first person Aidan reaches out to in his emotional suffering. His commitment to continuing to live when he felt actively suicidal, before starting treatment, emerged with her invitation to be used as his source of primary identification. She said, "Imagine if I was the one telling you I felt this way. That's how I feel when you tell me you want to die." Through empathic mutual recognition (Benjamin, 1988), Aidan developed a semi-internalized good introject (Klein, 1975), which he has slowly learned to rely upon except for in his most guilty and fragmented states, when he reaches out to Ramona for support. Reaching to Ramona always works, and the urge to self-harm is diminished.

Through the course of the therapy, Aidan has expressed only liberal political views and opinions. He has expressed his support for same-sex marriage, for women's reproductive healthcare rights, for religious diversity, and for race equality. He supported Bernie Sanders in the Democratic primary race. For this reason, I was surprised when, on November 9th, Aidan revealed to me that, "I'm a pretty good liar." What did Aidan mean? He was sometimes insincere. He would sometimes read people's expectations and respond accordingly, instead of honestly. This ranged from the standard "Good," in response to "How are you?" in casual conversation, to allowing his parents and others in his community to go on thinking he believes in God, although he identifies as atheist. In this case, he had withheld the truth from Ramona about his having voted for Trump.

Like most liberals, Aidan felt that Hillary Clinton would surely win the election. Like most Democratic party voters, he viewed Trump's candidacy as a bizarre endeavor doomed to failure. Of course the country would not elect such a person as its president. Comedian Roseanne Barr, interviewed on Marc Maron's podcast, might have articulated even the most cynical liberal perspective with her assertion about Clinton's impending win, "She already has the receipt," (Maron, 2016). Aidan confessed he had voted for Trump, "as a joke, because it would be ironic if he won. I never really thought it could happen, though! The good thing is my county went to Clinton, so it didn't matter anyway." Aidan and his guy friends hung out in a group chat through the night of the election, watching history unfold like satire. The guilt did not come on until Aidan spoke to Ramona the next day. She was distraught, like so many others, worrying about the future of the country, especially the marginalized groups Trump had promised to target (Wang, 2016; Merica, 2017). Aidan empathized with her grief, consoled her, and kept the knowledge of his vote to himself. After his confession that session, the issue of Aidan's vote for Trump did not come up in therapy again. The salient material, after all, was the mutual empathy between him and Ramona, and his identification with her.

In my reveries of Aidan following that session, I chalked his vote up to a youthful naiveté, to a lack of the context that comes from years of participation in American politics. I reflected that I had also thrown away my first presidential vote, having voted for Ralph Nader. That vote, in theory, may have helped hand the election to Bush, but, like Aidan, my county went to Gore anyway. On closer inspection, however, my naiveté had the flavor of a bubble of optimism, where Aidan's had a cynical negativism. In both cases, the explanation is more complex than my initial impressions, and both votes contain meaningful dynamic considerations.

Aidan's vote was a negating disidentification with the very order he consciously identified with, and expected to take precedence, regardless of his political action. It was, from that perspective, a self-negating political act. Following a similar pattern to Aidan's self-harm, aggressive impulses were so unmanageable they had to be denied, and redirected. Encountering Ramona's perspective brought him into uncomfortable contact with a disavowed emotional state, namely anger, which generated guilt. In a sense, she talked him back into his own morality, reminding him, through his empathy for her, to stretch his empathy further outward into identification with the marginalized others who may suffer as a result of the election. Having taken these steps, he was able to undo his guilt and move on.

Aidan's vote for Trump falls under the umbrella of a projective identification (Bion, 1959, 1983; Ogden, 1977; Bollas, 1987). His aggression, detached from consciousness, and entirely ego-dystonic, was thrown outward into the political sphere, a mere joke. This joke, however, does not fit the description humor as a taboo impulse disguised and transformed into a shared sense of pleasure (Freud, 1905, 1928; Christoff & Dauphin, 2018). Instead, it tells a lie about Aidan. It tells the story of a disaffected young man who values dominance, competition, and similarity. This is neither how Aidan identifies nor who I know him to be. He is a good person who values difference, equal rights, and caring for others. I am also not suggesting that Aidan harbors unconscious hatred for the marginalized groups who are already being negatively affected by Trump's presidency (Hersher, 2017; Santos, 2017; Lewin, 2017), or that he unconsciously believes in Trump's message, while finding this stance simultaneously unacceptable to consciousness. Rather, I am suggesting that Aidan's banishing of his own aggression from consciousness, especially aggressive impulses towards cared-for others, prevented him from taking a political action that accurately represented his values. On the social political level, projective identification takes on the form of false projection, or pathological projection, described by Horkheimer and Adorno (1944/2002).

False Projection

The *Elements of Anti-Semitism* described by Horkheimer and Adorno in 1944, although specific to the perspective of German Jewish refugees during WWII, are also applicable to current American trends in hate. It was Adorno and Horkheimer's clearly identified desire to use their historical placement to understand more general emergent themes in the dialectic of history. False projection, like projective identification, situates disavowed impulses or self-aspects into a fabricated other, created for the purpose of this projection. The group (in the case of false projection) or person (in the case of projective identification) exists in its own right, but the perception of that other is skewed in the eyes of the projector, due to the disavowal of self-aspects. Writing during WWII, they focused on the most prominent example of false projection of their time, Anti-Semitism. Anti-Semitism, they wrote, arose from "the urge to make everyone the same," (p. 139). Like projective identification, "if mimesis makes itself resemble its surroundings, false projection makes its surroundings resemble itself," (p. 154). As part of this projection, "Impulses which are not acknowledged by the subject and yet are his, are attributed to the object: the prospective victim," (p. 154). The "Bad Hombre" Trump sees in Mexican immigrants, then, is a disidentified mimetic projection of himself. Divorced from the self, it must then be destroyed. Walls must be built. Borders must be enforced. Law and Order, that form of violence dressed in civilization, must prevail. This process, however, consistently fails to cure the world. Instead, those who enact false projection, "transform the world into the hell they have always taken it to be," (p. 165). Trump's supporters and those that fail to oppose him, in turn,

must participate in the pathological projection, in order to carry it through to concrete action. The manner of participation is manifold. From Aidan's repressed aggression that usually surfaces as self-loathing (Freud, 1917), to the most explicit forms of malignant hatred (Domonoske, 2016), false projection depends upon the complicity of the people.

False projection's opposite, freedom from oppression, celebration of difference, neither mimesis nor domination, "would depend on whether the ruled, in face of absolute madness, could master themselves and hold the madness back. Only the liberation of thought from power, the abolition of violence, could realize the idea that has been unrealized until now: that the Jew," the Black person, the Muslim refugee, the Mexican immigrant, the disabled person, the LGBTQ person, the woman, "is a human being," (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1944/2002, p. 165). Such a step, Horkheimer and Adorno assert, "would indeed prove the turning point of history," (p. 165). In contrast to Freud's (1939) evolutionary process of civilization as passive, what is suggested here is active, and arduous. True empathic realization of the humanity of others is difficult, and often comes at a personal cost. While systems of power larger than the individual shunt us into pathways of pathological projection and complicity, only an intentional and persistent process of self-exploration, followed by ego-syntonic political action, can lead to the end of violence. The exploration is shadowy and threatening. Like Aidan's psychotherapy process, it will require encountering affects and complexes we would prefer to repress. Once encountered, however, again and again, and recognized, we might have more flexibility regarding our choice of action, more control over the course of history.

Unconscious processes on an individual and social scale will always affect the political environment. The solution to their eruption in unexpected and dangerous directions, arrived at with the help of Freud (1939) and the Frankfurt School, suggests that perhaps the vision of a better world where things are done on purpose and in keeping with the ego-syntonic American ethos can one day come to fruition. If so, however, the unconscious forces to be acknowledged and examined are formidable. The work required will be grueling, but meaningful.

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