

CHAPTER 4

Donald Trump as Authoritarian Populist: A Frommian Analysis

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In this article, I discuss in detail how Erich Fromm's categories can help describe Trump's character, or 'temperament,' a word used to characterize a major flaw in Trump in the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign and his rule as President by the end of the first year. In *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (1973), Fromm engages in a detailed analysis of the authoritarian character as sadistic, excessively narcissistic, malignantly aggressive, vengeably destructive, and necrophiliac, personality traits arguably applicable to Trump. In the following analysis, I will systematically deploy key Frommian socio-psychoanalytic categories to Trump and his followers to show how they can illuminate Trump and authoritarian populism.¹

Trump, in Freudian terms used by Fromm, can be seen as the **Id** of American politics, often driven by sheer aggression, narcissism, and, rage. If someone criticizes him, they can be sure of being attacked back, often brutally.² And notoriously, Trump exhibits the most gigantic and unrestrained **Ego** yet seen in U.S. politics constantly trumping his wealth, his success in business, how smart he is, how women and all the people who work for him love him so much, and how his book *The Art of the Deal* (1987/2005) is the greatest book ever written – although just after saying that to a Christian evangelical audience, he backtracked and said The Bible is the greatest book, but that his *Art of the Deal* is

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the second greatest, which for Trump is the bible of how to get rich and maybe how to win elections.

Trump, however, like classical Fascist leaders, arguably has an underdeveloped **Superego**, in the Freudian sense that generally refers to a voice of social morality and conscience. While Trump has what we might call a highly developed Social Ego that has fully appropriated capitalist drives for success, money, power, ambition, and domination, biographies of Trump indicate that he has had few life-long friends, discards women with abandon (he is on his third marriage), and brags of his ruthlessness in destroying competitors and enemies.³

Drawing on Fromm's *Escape from Freedom* (1941) and other writings, and studies of *The Authoritarian Personality* done by the Frankfurt School (Adorno et al. 1950), Trump obviously fits the Critical Theory model of an authoritarian character and his 2016 Presidential campaign replicates in some ways the submission to the leader and the movement found in authoritarian populism. The Frankfurt School undertook in the 1930s studies of the **authoritarian personality** and Fascism, although I would argue that Trump is not Hitler and his followers are not technically fascists.⁴ As I indicate in the Preface to this volume, Trump had neither the well-articulated party apparatus, nor the full-blown ideology of the Nazis, and thus more resembles the phenomena of **authoritarian populism** or **neofascism** which we can use to explain Trump and his supporters.

While Trump does not have a party apparatus or ideology like the Nazis, parallels to authoritarian movements appeared clear to me watching a TV broadcast on 21 August 2015, of Trump's mega-rally in Mobile, Alabama. I watched all afternoon as the cable news networks broadcast nothing but Trump, hyping up his visit to a stadium where he was expecting 30–40,000 spectators, the biggest rally of the season. Although only 20-some thousand showed up, which was still a 'huge' event in the heat of summer before the primaries had even begun in earnest, Trump's flight into Alabama on his own Trump Jet and his rapturous reception by his admirers became the main story of the news cycle, as did many such daily events in what the media called 'the summer of Trump' (see Kellner 2016b).

What I focused on in watching the TV footage of the event was how the networks began showing repeated images of Trump flying his airplane over and around the stadium before landing and then cut away to big images of the Trump Jet every few minutes. This media spectacle reminded me of one of the most powerful propaganda films of all time – Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* – a German Nazi propaganda film of 1935. *Triumph* focuses on Hitler flying in an airplane through the clouds, looking out the window at the crowds below, landing, and driving through mass crowds applauding him as he proceeded through the streets of Nuremberg for a mass rally. The crowds along the way and in the stadium greeted Hitler with rapture as he entered the spectacle

of a highly touted and orchestrated Nuremburg mass Nazi rally that Riefenstahl captured on film.

I do not know if the Trump operatives planned this parallel, or if it was just a coincidence, but it is clear that Trump, like Hitler, has organized a fervent mass movement outside of the conventional political party apparatuses. The **anger and rage** that Fromm attributed to Nazi masses in *Escape From Freedom* (1941) is also exhibited in Trump's followers as is the **idolatry** toward their Fuhrer, who arguably see Trump as the **magic helper** who will solve their problems by building a giant wall to keep out the threatening Other, a Fairy Tale scenario that Fromm would have loved to deconstruct.

Trump's behavior during the 2016 election campaign and the first year of his presidency reveals the pathological symptoms of the authoritarian character analysed by Fromm (1941, 1973). Trump clearly exhibits traits of the **sadist** who Fromm described as 'a person with an intense desire to control, hurt, humiliate, another person,' a trait that is one of the defining feature of the authoritarian personality' (1973). Frommian sadism was exemplified in Trump's behavior toward other Republican Party candidates in primary debates, in his daily insults of all and sundry, and at Trump rallies in the behavior of him and his followers toward protestors. During the 2016 campaign cycle, a regular feature of a Trump rally involved Trump supporters yelling at, hitting, and even beating up protestors, while Trump shouts 'get them out! Out!'. When one Trump follower sucker punched a young African American protestor in a campaign event at Fayetteville, NC on 9 March 2016, Trump offered to pay his legal expenses.

Despite the accelerating violence at Trump rallies during the summer of 2016, and intense pressure for Trump to renounce violence at his campaign events and reign in his rowdy followers, Trump deflected blame on protestors and continued to exhibit the joy of a sadist controlling his environment and inflicting pain on his enemies, as police and his followers continued to attack and pummel protestors at his events. When Trump's campaign manager Corey Lewandowski was charged with assault on a reporter, Trump continued to defend him, although Lewandowski was fired when the Trump campaign brought in veteran political hired gun Paul Manafort, who had served dictators like Angolan terrorist Jonas Savimbi, the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence with notorious al-Qaeda links, Ukrainian dictator and Putin ally Viktor Yanukovich, foreign dictators such as Ferdinand Marcos and Joseph Mobuto of Zaire, and many more of the Who's Who list of toxic dictators and world-class rogues (among whom one must number Manafort). Apparently, involved in a power struggle within the Trump campaign with Manafort, Lewandowski was fired and has been subpoenaed by Special Counsel Robert Mueller who is investigating crime and possible conspiracy with Russians in the 2016 election.

Fromm's analysis of the **narcissistic** personality in *The Sane Society* (1955) and *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* helps explain the Trump phenomenon,

given that Trump is one of the most narcissistic figures to appear in recent U.S. politics. For Fromm: 'Narcissism is the essence of all severe psychic pathology. For the narcissistically involved person, there is only one reality: that of his own thought processes, feelings and needs. The world outside is not experienced or perceived objectively, i.e., as existing in its own terms, conditions and needs' (Fromm 1955, 36). Michael D'Antonio in his book *Never Enough: Donald Trump and the Pursuit of Success* sees Trump as the exemplification of the 'culture of narcissism' described by Christopher Lasch and notes:

Trump was offered as a journalist's paragon of narcissism at least as far back as 1988. The academics and psychologists got involved a few years later would go on to make the diagnosis of Trump into a kind of professional sport. Trump makes an appearance in texts for the profession, including *Abnormal Behavior in the 21st Century* and *Personality Disorders and Older Adults: Diagnosis, Assessment, and Treatment*. He also appears in books for laypeople such as *The Narcissism Epidemic: Loving in the Age of Entitlement; Help! I'm in Love with a Narcissist; and When you Love a Man Who Loves Himself*.⁵

Trump's extreme narcissism is evident in his obsession with putting his name on his buildings or construction sites, ranging from Trump Towers to (now failed) casinos in New Jersey to golf courses throughout the world. Yet Trump often fails, as in his attempt in 1979 to get a New York convention centre named after his father, or his failure to get a football stadium named the Trumpdome, in an unsuccessful endeavour in the mid-1980s, when Trump, first, was blocked from getting an NFL football team, and then saw the USFL football league in which he had a team collapse (Barrett 2016, 342ff).⁶ Indeed, Trump supporters should read the Trump biographies to discover the grubby details of all of Trump's failed projects, including a string of casinos in New Jersey and at least four major bankruptcies in businesses that he ran into the ground, since Trump grounds his claims for the presidency on the alleged success of his business ventures (Barrett 2016; D'Antonio 2015; O'Donnell and Rutherford 1991).

Although Trump presents himself as the People's Choice and voice of the Forgotten Man, Trump himself has been especially exploitative of his workers, and in his life style and habitus lives in a radically different world than the hoi polloi. For example, in 1985, Trump bought a 118-room mansion in Palm Beach, Florida Mar-A-Lago that he immediately opened for TV interview segments and that launched Donald's second career as a frequent star of 'Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous.' Trump became an exemplar of what Thorstein Veblen described as 'conspicuous consumption' (1899/1994), a trait that the Donald continues to cultivate to excess up to the present. Indeed, Trump has been particularly assiduous in branding the Trump name and selling himself as a celebrity and leader his entire adult life.

Another conceptual key to Trump's authoritarian personality is found in Fromm's analysis of 'malignant aggression' developed in *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (1973). Trump arguably embodies both spontaneous and 'bound in character structure' aspects of what Fromm characterizes as malignant aggression (270ff), spontaneously lashing out at anyone who dares to criticize him, and arguably his deep-rooted extremely aggressive tendencies help characterize Trump and connect him to classic authoritarian leaders. Trump typically describes his opponents as 'losers,' and uses extremely hostile language in attacking all of his opponents and critics. In his TV reality show *The Apprentice* (2005–2015), which features a group of competitors battling for a high-level management job in one of Trump's organizations, each segment ended with Trump triumphantly telling one of the contestants that 'you're fired!' – a telling phrase that Trump filed for a trademark in 2004, and which revealed his sadistic joy in controlling and destroying individuals.

As Henry Giroux argues (2016), 'loser' for Trump 'has little to do with them losing in the more general sense of the term. On the contrary, in a culture that trades in cruelty and divorces politics from matters of ethics and social responsibility, 'loser' is now elevated to a pejorative insult that humiliates and justifies not only symbolic violence, but also (as Trump has made clear in many of his rallies) real acts of violence waged against his critics, such as members of the Movement for Black Lives.' 'Loser' means exclusion, humiliation, and abjection, a trope prevalent in sports, business, and politics where 'winners take all' and losers are condemned to the ignominy of failure, the ultimate degradation in Trump's amoral capitalist universe.

Hence, I would argue that both Trump's TV reality show *The Apprentice* and Trump's behavior on the show and in public embody Frommian analysis of malignant aggression. Indeed, it was not enough for Trump to defeat his Republican Party opponents in the 2016 Presidential election, but he attempted to destroy them. Trump described his initial major opponent Jeb Bush as 'low energy' and gloated as Jeb failed to gain support in the primaries and dropped out of the race early. Rubio was dismissed as 'little Marco,' Cruz disparaged as 'Lyin' Ted,' and as for the hapless Ben Carson, Trump tweeted: 'With Ben Carson wanting to hit his mother on head with a hammer, stab a friend and [claiming that Egyptian] Pyramids [were] built for grain storage – don't people get it?' Curiously, despite these malignant insults, the ineffable Carson endorsed Trump after he dropped out of the race, and entered his cabinet as Secretary of Housing and Urban Development.

Already during the primary campaign, Trump began referring to Hillary Clinton as 'Crooked Hillary,' and by the time of the Republican National Convention his audiences shouted out 'lock her up' whenever Trump used the phrase. In a Pavlovian gesture, Trump has his troops orchestrated to perform in rituals of aggression, as, for instance, when he refers to the wall he promises to build on the Mexican border, and calls to his audience, 'who's gonna pay,' the audience shouts out in a booming unison: 'Mexico!'

In fact, Trump's attitudes and behavior toward women exhibit traits of Fromm's malignant aggression, as well as blatant sexism. The day after the initial Republican debate on 6 August 2015, Trump complained about Fox News debate moderator Megyn Kelly, whining: 'She gets out and she starts asking me all sorts of ridiculous questions. You could see there was blood coming out of her eyes, blood coming out of her wherever (Arana 2016). As outrage over Trump's comment spread, he took to Twitter to deny that he meant to imply Kelly was menstruating, claiming in a Tweet: 'Mr. Trump made Megyn Kelly look really bad – she was a mess with her anger and totally caught off guard. Mr. Trump said 'blood was coming out of her eyes and whatever' meaning nose, but wanted to move on to more important topics. Only a deviant would think anything else' (op. cit). Trump's appalling reference to Megyn Kelly's blood is paralleled by his off-colour comments about Hillary Clinton ranting that her use of the bathroom during a Democratic Party debate was 'too disgusting' to talk about – 'disgusting, really disgusting,' he repeated. He also delighted in recounting how Ms Clinton got 'schlonged' by Barack Obama when she lost to him in the 2008 Democratic primary.

Trump's aggressive and compulsive Tweets and daily insults against his opponent exemplify the 'vengeful destructiveness' described by Fromm as part of malignant aggression, which is another defining trait of the authoritarian leader. As an example of Trump's propensities toward vengeful destructiveness, take Trump's remarks toward Judge Gonzalo Curiel's Mexican heritage who Trump claimed had an 'Absolute Conflict' in being unable to rule impartially in a fraud lawsuit against Donald Trump's now defunct real estate school, Trump University, because he was Mexican-American. Trump claimed that the Mexican-American heritage of the judge, who was born in Indiana to Mexican immigrants, was relevant because of Trump's campaign stance against illegal immigration and his pledge to seal the southern U.S. border with Mexico. Despite the fact that the Judge was ruling on a case involving Trump University, the Donald just couldn't help making nasty vengeful and destructive remarks against the Judge, who was a highly respected jurist and who was widely defended by the legal community against Trump's attack.

Further, Trump threatened the Republican Party in March 2016 with riots at its summer convention if there was any attempt to block his nomination, and in August 2016 as his poll numbers fell and Hillary Clinton was widening her lead, Trump claimed that the election was 'rigged' and that his followers may riot if he doesn't win (Voorhees 2016). Throughout the Republican primaries, Trump threatened the Republican Party with destruction if they attempted to block his candidacy in any way, just as he consistently attacked and threatened any media outlet or individual who criticized him and aroused his fire. The spectre of a Republican Party candidate attacking the party that nominated him and its chief media propaganda apparatus, *Fox News*, exhibits, I believe, an out of control malignant aggression and vengeful destructiveness syndrome.

Indeed, although Trump made it through a chaotic 2016 Republican National Convention and was proclaimed their official party candidate, even after beating his maligned and deeply insulted opponents in the Republican primary contest, Trump continued his defamations in even more destructive and offensive discourse. As Maureen Dowd (2016) pointed out Jeb Bush was “a one day kill” as a gloating Trump put it, with the “low energy” taunt. “Liddle Marco” and “Lyn’ Ted” bit the dust. “One-for-38 Kasich” fell by the wayside.’ And after John Kasich refused to intend the Republican convention crowning Trump, even though it was held in a city in which he is governor, and after Ted Cruz told delegates to vote their consciences in the election, as a dig at Donald, a bitter Trump proclaimed on numerous weekend TV interviews after the convention that he was considering raising over \$10 million dollar funds to assure his Republican nemeses defeat in their next election campaigns.⁷

More astonishing, after Trump lashed out against a Muslim family that had lost its son in military service and testified to their loss and disgust at Trump’s attacks on Muslims at a much-discussed moment in the Democratic National convention, Trump attacked the family, targeting the grieving mother who had stood as a silent witness beside her husband and whose silence he attacked as evidence that Muslims didn’t let women speak in public. Trump’s attacks on the Khan family continued for days after the convention and when major Republicans distanced themselves from Trump’s rancorous and vile comments, Trump proclaimed on August 2 that he was not endorsing Republican House Leader Paul Ryan, former Presidential candidate John McCain, and others who had criticized him, thus threatening to blow apart the Republican Party – driving Party leaders to declare that they were staging an ‘intervention’ with Trump over the weekend to try to persuade their candidate to act more ‘presidential’ and to stop attacking Republican leaders – a gesture his base seems to love.⁸

Demonstrating his deeply rooted and uncontrollable malignant aggression, Trump had what observers saw as the worst week of his campaign in early August 2016 as he continued to malign the Khan family, praised Vladimir Putin and called on the Russian strongman to hack Hillary Clinton’s email, refused until the last moment to endorse fellow Republicans Ryan and McCain, threw a crying baby and its mother out of one of his rallies, and continued to make crazy off-the-cuff remarks. Topping off his going over the top, on 9 August 2016 in a rally at Wilmington, North Carolina, Trump appeared to suggest that gun rights supporters might take matters into their own hands if Hillary Clinton is elected President and appoints Judges who favour stricter gun control measures. Repeating the lie that Clinton wanted to abolish the right to bear arms, Trump warned that: ‘If she gets to pick her judges, nothing you can do, folks,’ Mr. Trump said, as the crowd began to boo. He quickly added: ‘Although the Second Amendment people – maybe there is, I don’t know.’

Some members of the audience visibly winced and for the next several days the news cycle was dominated by discussion that Trump had suggested that

‘Second Amendment’ people (i.e. gun owners) might have to take the law into their own hands if Clinton was elected, raising the spectre of political assassination and reminding people of the wave of political assassinations in the 1960s of JFK, RFK, and Martin Luther King, and assassination attempts against Presidents Gerald Ford and Ronald Reagan. Democrats, gun control advocates, and others, accused Trump of possibly inciting violence against Hillary Clinton or liberal Justices. Bernice A. King, daughter of the Rev Dr Martin Luther King Jr, called Mr. Trump’s words ‘distasteful, disturbing, dangerous,’ and many other prominent Americans denounced Trump’s dangerous rabble-rousing as further evidence that he was not fit to be President of the United States (Corasaniti and Haberman 2016).

As usual, Trump and his surrogates spun Trump’s statements and attacked the media for twisting his meaning, and other Republicans like Paul Ryan dismissed it as a bad joke, but it was clear that this was further evidence that Trump was seriously unbalanced and highly dangerous. The extremely destructive behavior typical of Trump’s entire campaign and the first year of his presidency leads me to suggest that Fromm’s analysis of the ‘necrophilic’ as an extreme form of malignant aggression also applies to Trump. Fromm illustrates the concept of the necrophilic personality through an extensive study of Hitler as the paradigmatic of a highly destructive authoritarian personality, as he did a study of Himmler to illustrate his concept of the sadistic personality (Fromm 1973). Fromm argues that the ‘necrophilic transforms all life into things, including himself and the manifestations of his human faculties of reason, seeing, hearing, tasting, loving. Sexuality become a technical skill (‘the love machine’); feelings are flattened and sometimes substituted for by sentimentality; joy, the expression of intense aliveness, is replaced by “fun” or excitement; and whatever love and tenderness man has is directed toward machines and gadgets’ (Fromm 1973, 325ff).

In Fromm’s analysis, the necrophilic personality type is fundamentally empty, needing to fill themselves with ever more acquisitions, conquests, or victories. Hence, it is no accident that the still best single book on Trump by Michael D’Antonio (2015) is titled *Never Enough: Donald Trump and the Pursuit of Success*. Trump’s need for adoration and his malignant and destructive rage at all criticism and opposition shows an extremely disordered personality who constitutes a grave danger to the United States and the world.

The necrophilic personality fills his emptiness with sadism, aggression, amassing wealth and power, and is prone to violence and self-destruction. Accounts of Trump’s business dealings and entanglements with women show an incredible recklessness. When his first two marriages were unravelling, Trump carried out well-publicized affairs and seemed to revel in all the dirty publicity, no matter how demeaning. Likewise, in the 1990s when his business empire was spectacularly unravelling, Trump continued to make risky investments, put himself in impossible debt (with the help of banks who were taken in by his myth as a business man), and conned business associates, financial institutions and the public at large as he spiralled into near bankruptcy.⁹

Trump's destructive aspects were at the heart of his run for the presidency. Revealingly, Trump's initial 'argument' for his presidency was to build a wall to keep immigrants from pouring over our southern border along with a promise to arrest all 'illegal immigrants' and send them back over the border, a highly destructive (and probably impossible) action that would tear apart countless families. Trump promised to totally destroy ISIS and threatened to bring back waterboarding 'and worse, much much worse!' he shouted repeatedly at his rallies and in interviews, although some Generals and military experts pointed out that Trump could not order troops or other Americans to break international law.

Hence, the peril and threats we face in the Trump presidency raise the issue of what does it mean to have an arguably sadistic, excessively narcissistic, malignantly aggressive, vengeably destructive, and necrophilic individual like Trump as President of the United States? If Trump indeed fits Fromm's criteria of the malignantly aggressive and necrophilic personality, this should be upsetting and raise some serious questions about Trump. Fromm was obsessed for decades about the danger of nuclear war and would no doubt be extremely disturbed at the thought of the Donald having his itchy finger on nuclear weapons launching – as Trump threatened in Fall 2017 against North Korea who he threatened to totally destroy North Korea with 'fire and fury.'

Indeed, the Trump presidency has revealed Trump as the most narcissistic individual ever to sit in the White House whose multiple daily tweets tout his greatness and bully and attack his opponents. He revealed malignant aggression in his presidency from the first day in which he called for a Muslim ban from selected countries (where he had no business interests, see Kellner 2017) – a decision quickly overturned by courts. His executive orders undoing progressive legislation and regulations established by the Obama administration exhibit his malignant drive to destroy U.S. liberal democracy, as does his daily attacks on the media, Congress, the judiciary, and whoever dares to criticize King Donald the Dumbass.

Hence, Frommian categories applied to Trump help illuminate why Donald Trump is so chaotic, dangerous, and destructive, and how risky it was to even contemplate Trump being President of the United States in these dangerous times. It is also worrisome to contemplate that Trump has developed a large and rowdy following through his demagoguery and that authoritarian populism constitutes a clear and present danger to U.S. democracy and global peace and well-being.

Notes

- ¹ An earlier, pre-election, version of this study was published in Kellner 2016a. I updated the article carrying the analysis through the first year of Trump's presidency.

- ² See Freud 1923/1990. For Freud, the Id represents the irrational and aggressive components of the personality, while the Ego represents the rational self which can suffer, however, narcissistic tendencies that undercut its rationality. We shall see below how Fromm builds on Freud's psychoanalytic categories in ways that they can be applied to demagogues like Hitler and Trump and mass movements of authoritarian populism, or neofascism. For an overview of Fromm's life and works, see Funk 2003.
- ³ See D'Antonio 2015 and Blair 2000. The chapter on 'Born to Compete' in Blair 2000, 223ff., documents Trump's competitiveness and drive for success at an early age.
- ⁴ See Kellner 2016b and 2017.
- ⁵ D'Antonio, op. cit. California Congresswoman Karen Bass (D-Cal) began a petition to request that mental health professionals evaluate Trump for Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD), insisting that he had all the symptoms. See Wayne Rojas, 'Karen Bass Wants Mental Health Professionals to Evaluate Trump. Calif. Democrat suspects GOP nominee has Narcissistic Personality Disorder', Rollcall, 3 August 2016 at <http://www.rollcall.com/news/politics/karen-bass-wants-mental-health-professionals-to-evaluate-trump#sthash.75ABMmmT.dpuf> (accessed 2 August 2016). On the traits of Narcissistic Personality Disorder and how Trump embodies them, see Blum 2016.
- ⁶ Perhaps vengeful narcissist Trump's early failures to make it in the NFL explains the virulence and persistence of his tirades against the NFL in Fall/Winter 2017, although these tirades are overdetermined by his racial animus against African Americans who have largely been the focus of his NFL attacks to the delight of his racist base.
- ⁷ On Trump's threat to form 'Anti-certain candidate PACs' to defeat those Republicans who opposed him, see Phillip Rucker's interview with Trump appended to Cilizza 2016.
- ⁸ The intervention did not take place, but Trump did endorse Ryan and McCain reading his tepid endorsement from note cards and not looking directly up into the camera, signaling that he lacked enthusiasm and was making the endorsements under duress.
- ⁹ For an account of both Trump's marriage and financial disasters, see Blair 2000, 385–452.

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