

Trump as Heteropolitical Obsessional Neurosis: Presidential Politics After the Death of God

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If one blows away all the toxic miasma of American partisan politics, it becomes apparent that Donald Trump is not so much a “problem” as a *symptom*.

Of course, the term “problem” in the context of this collection itself implies an unabashed partisan position, comparable to the present tendency for conservative talk radio hosts to decry the “problem” of the millennial generation enthusiastically embracing socialism, or the constant harping by young people, who have turned away from their evangelical upbringing, about their elders’ unflagging support both for Trump himself and their condemnation of gay marriage – unless what we consider truly “problematic” is that half of a certain population sees the issue entirely different from the other. “Problematizing” Trump should run more along the lines of a physician problematizing a fever, which does not mean the kind old doctor takes the patient to task for falling ill, but rather seeks to diagnose, or trace the etiology of, the disorder itself.

The election of Trump, as I have written elsewhere was a socio-cultural tremor of monumental proportions, unanticipated at the time by both pundits and analysts,

resulting from the mounting contradictions and dysfunctions within the neoliberal global economic system.¹ The election itself, along with the ever intensifying, pestilential, and irreconcilable partisan warfare that has become normal and routine since that fateful event, bespeaks an acute, deep-reaching, and doggedly unacknowledged labyrinth of fissures and fault-lines that propagate beneath the political landscape. American politics itself has become a gargantuan shared version of what psychoanalysis classically has termed an “obsessional neurosis,” one in which the account of the neurotic remains stringently *unselfcritical*, while the healer struggles to persuade the patient to take a more realistic view of the symptoms at hand in all their intricacies, vagaries, and nuances.

The Meaning of “Obsessional Neurosis”

Before trying to assess the symptoms themselves, however, it is important to understand what Freud and Lacan – the two twentieth century luminaries of psychoanalysis – understood by the notion of an “obsessional neurosis”. Freud had built his earlier career on the clinical investigation of hysterics, about which he wrote a number of important papers in the 1890s. I would note in passing that I am not in any way attempting to do what is sometimes dubbed “psycho-history”, or to psychoanalyze the principal combatants currently in the public square. I am merely drawing on familiar psycho-social constructs as heuristic devices in elucidating what have obviously become collective psycho-social pathologies that are driven home to us in the round-the-clock news cycle. Freud seems to have first linked obsession with hysteria in an 1894 brief in which he criticized his contemporary Pierre Janet for overemphasizing the phenomenon of dissociation and “split consciousness.” Rather than succumbing to dissociation, Freud writes, the patient

...in order to fend off an incompatible idea...sets about separating it from its affect, then that affect is obliged to remain in the psychological sphere. The idea, now weakened, is still left in consciousness, separated from all association. But its affect, which has become free, attaches itself to other ideas which are not in themselves incompatible; and, thanks to this false connection, those ideas turn into obsessional ideas. This, in a few words, is the psychological theory of obsessions...²

In his subsequent observations throughout the 1890s Freud honed the notion of hysteria as a mechanism of “defense” against incompatible representations in the conscious mind, which are transformed into obsessional ideas, motivating the person to behave in bizarre, compulsive, and highly ritualized ways. In 1907 in an article entitled “Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices”, Freud tied these forms of behavior to sacred ceremonies, an insight which became the kernel for thesis in *The Future of an Illusion* that religion was a “universal obsessional neurosis.” The obsessive, according to Freud, is unconscious of the ideational nexus toward which he or she is engineering a defense. “The person who is obeying a compulsion carries it out without understanding its meaning – or at any rate its chief meaning.” Yet, even more significantly, the excessive affective response is determined by negative self-identification and feelings of self-reproach. “We may say,” Freud argues, “that the sufferer from compulsions and prohibitions behaves as if he were dominated by a sense of guilt, of which, however, he knows nothing, so that we must call it an unconscious sense of guilt, in spite of the apparent contradiction in terms.”³

By the time Freud had moved on from clinical inquiries to what is often termed his “metapsychological” writings – the generalization of psychoanalytical discoveries in order to address broader philosophical questions about human nature, history, and society – in the aftermath of the First World War, he began to reframe the question of how obsessional ideas arose more in terms of what in that era came to be known as the “sociology of knowledge.” In that respect, his thinking became more aligned with the Marxist theory of ideology, even though Freud himself was not at all a revolutionary. Freud’s ideas eventually found resonances with the efforts of Gramsci and the Frankfurt school to redefine the phenomenon of class struggle as a cultural dialectic more than one of political economy. Writing in *The Future of an Illusion* in 1927 Freud noted that:

...in all present day cultures...it is understandable that the suppressed people should develop an intense hostility towards a culture whose existence they make possible by their work, but in whose wealth they have too small a share. In such conditions an internalization of the cultural prohibitions among the suppressed people is not to be expected.⁴

Thus, in the face of class resentment and revolt, it becomes necessary for the ruling elites to deploy familiar, accessible symbolic or cultural forms to forge new identities that render the proles more compliant and willing to do the bidding of their

masters. Freud, in essence, was anticipating the later argument elaborated by Herbert Marcuse.

The narcissistic satisfaction provided by the cultural ideal is also among the forces which are successful in combating the hostility to culture within the cultural unit. This satisfaction can be shared in not only by the favoured classes, which enjoy the benefits of the culture, but also by the suppressed ones, since the right to despise the people outside it compensates them for the wrongs they suffer within their own unit. No doubt one is a wretched plebeian, harassed by debts and military service; but, to make up for it, one is a Roman citizen, one has one's share in the task of ruling other nations and dictating their laws.⁵

Marcuse, seeking to synthesize Marx and Freud in his *Eros and Civilization* (1955), identified sexual emancipation as the cipher in late industrial society for genuine revolutionary transformation. However, in his later book *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), a groundbreaking work which directly as well as indirectly influenced the student revolts of that decade, Marcuse denounced the co-optation of the fledgling sexual revolution by consumer capitalism and corporate advertising, dubbing it "repressive sublimation". Instead of promoting the liberation of society, Marcuse argued, the sexual revolution as a ubiquitous feature of popular media had become a tool of capitalist exploitation. Popular culture *en masse* no longer consisted in "the denial and rejection of the 'cultural values,'" but "repressively" sustained social domination "through their wholesale incorporation into the established order, through their reproduction and display on a massive scale." Marcuse added that these values, "in fact...serve as instruments of social cohesion."⁶

Marcuse in certain key respects refined Freud's intuitions concerning not just culture, but also religion. "Religious ideas," Freud had written, as the gravamen of a "universal obsessional neurosis", can be characterized as "teachings and assertions about facts and conditions of external (or internal) reality which tell one something one has not discovered for oneself and which lay claim to one's belief."⁷ The inaccessibility and inviolability of the sources of religious belief have to do with the fact that they amount to affect-configurations that are engendered by the disjunction between the true object of desire and its accompanying symbolic representations. As Freud notes, religious ideas are not at all cognitive errors or epistemological

defects. On the contrary, they are simply “illusions.” It is “characteristic of illusions,” he writes, “that they are derived from human wishes.” Freud as a child of the European Enlightenment, combined with his Austrian aristocratic contempt for the *hoi polloi* and his very real anxiety about the burgeoning of anti-Semitic as well as ethno-nationalist and fascist sentiments among the post-World War I democratic masses, was convinced that such “illusions” had no future if the intelligentsia stayed in charge. “Civilization has little to fear from educated people and brain-workers. In them the replacement of religious motives for civilized behaviour by other, secular motives would proceed unobtrusively; moreover, such people are to a large extent themselves vehicles of civilization.”⁸ From the educated classes one could expect the accomplishment of “the same aims as those whose realization you expect from your God.”⁹

Marcuse, however, writing in post-World War II America, recognized that psychoanalysis in the hands of the “educated classes” had ironically been snatched away by Neo-Freudian “revisionism” or “ego psychology.” In *Eros and Civilization*, published in 1955 at the height of the Eisenhower era with its pressures toward social conformity and bourgeois paranoia over the menace of Communism, Marcuse had warned about the insidious translation of Freud’s critical insights into what Philip Rieff would later term the “triumph of the therapeutic.”¹⁰ Such Freudian “revisionism”, Marcuse claimed, was responsible for the kind of class oppression Marx had described, one that was aided and abetted by systemic instinctual oppression for which the only outlet was the commodified sexuality of pop culture.

The Neo-Freudian schools promote the very same values as cure against unfreedom and suffering – as the triumph over repression. This intellectual feat is accomplished by expurgating the instinctual dynamic and reducing its part in the mental life. Thus purified, the psyche can again be redeemed by idealistic ethics and religion.¹¹

In other words, the true “illusion” is not traditional religious belief with all its supernatural and superstitious appurtenances, but the secularization of its contents *a la* Kantian moralism and the “repressive” redirection of the instincts themselves concomitantly toward harmless fantasies and socially “productive” group activities – what sociologist David Riesman in the mid-twentieth century dubbed “other-directedness.”¹² Marcuse, as it turns out, was profiling *avant la lettre* what Wendy

Brown sixty years later would characterize as the hegemonic force of moral “responsibilism” that pervades and epitomizes present day neoliberalism.¹³ For both Brown and Marcuse (not to mention Nietzsche a century earlier) it is systemic social idealism rather than overt political tyranny that, as the old Robert Flack song goes, that is killing us “softly with its song

Trump, Nietzsche’s Madman, and the Death of God

What does all of the foregoing tell us about the Trump phenomenon? Again, it is our contention that the “problem” of Trump is not really Trump, but the way in which the figure of Trump himself has become the vortex of a cultural cyclone that is ever more rapidly dismantling the entire infrastructure of Western liberal democracy. Both Trumpism and anti-Trumpism signify simply a potpourri of positionalities strewn across the ghostly spectrum of a single obsessional neurosis. Let us call it the *socio-politico-psychotic Trumpian imaginary*, if you wish. It is one that has overtaken the Western world in general, and the American cameo version in particular, after the death of God.

Nietzsche, who of course is responsible for coming up with the currently overused, abused, and misused shibboleth “God is dead” (*Gott ist tot*, a clever play on words in the original German, as it turns out), had his own proleptic view of the matter when he composed in the late 1880s his *Nachlass* that has come down to us under the title *The Will to Power*. Nietzsche, throughout his writings, had denigrated modern, secular, humanitarian culture as the direct heir to what he snidely referred to as “the Christian-moral view of the world.” The proper term that should be reserved for such a view, Nietzsche reiterated, is not “neurosis” but “decadence.” Such a hypermoralistic epistemology, according to Nietzsche, constitutes “a typical form of decadence, the moral hypersensitivity and hysteria of a sick mishmash populace grown weary and aimless”.¹⁴ Elsewhere in *The Will to Power* Nietzsche uses the term “nihilism” to connote the same symptomatology. It implies what Nietzsche, in contrast with how the phrase “death of God” has been leveraged for endless ideological, theological, and rhetorical purposes over the last half century, really had in mind with the trope, which he employs with surprising parsimony in his later writings. The speech of the “madman”, who prophetically and dramatically proclaims the death of God, in Nietzsche’s celebrated parable in his book *The Gay Science*, culminates in the famous question about whether all “these churches” of

the late Victorian era, supposedly the high-water mark of the history of “Christian civilization”, are not “the tombs and sepulchers of God.”¹⁵

Since Nietzsche with a few exceptions wrote in aphorisms and with his testy, polemical style almost never engaged in anything that might be remotely construed as philosophical argumentation, it is almost impossible to do the kind of standard exegesis with proof texts that might throw into relief exactly what he meant by “the death of God.” Nevertheless, if we perform a contextualized aggregation of the repeated, but not necessarily numerous instances where the notion of “God’s death” shows up in his work, the following sort of picture begins to emerge. First, it is clear Nietzsche is *not*, as many even superficial readers of him have pointed out, laying the groundwork for what in last two generations has been known as an “a/theology” or some kind of “secular” theological project that proceeds without the premise that the existence of, let alone belief in, God is necessary. Second, Nietzsche is not simply commenting in his signature, wry style – as some liberal Christian interpreters have at times interpreted him – on the shallowness and hypocrisy of bourgeois Christianity. Kierkegaard’s critique of “Christendom” is often confused with Nietzsche’s parabolic and poetic insinuations about the lifeworld of his day and age. Nietzsche, in fact, has a very dark and troubling vision of the “death of God” that his progressive admirers over time are seemingly incapable of fathoming. The death of God is neither an historical “mood swing”, a fluctuation in the *Zeitgeist*, nor a leitmotif of contemporary thought and culture. Nietzsche’s “madman” announces it as an “event” that is “still on its way,” that is “still wandering,” something comparable an enormous asteroid hurtling toward earth that is too mind-boggling, if not too horrifying, to consider or contemplate. The incomprehension of the madman’s audience – the denizens of the “marketplace” who represent perhaps the more sophisticated strands of conventional wisdom – testifies to its still yet unrealized “apocalyptic” ramifications. One is reminded, therefore, of the lines of the ancient Hebrew prophet Amos in reflecting on the irony that drips from the habituality with which Nietzsche’s proclamation of the death of God is misread: “Woe to you who long for the day of the LORD! Why do you long for the day of the LORD? That day will be darkness, not light.”¹⁶

In key respects Trump currently plays the part of Nietzsche’s madman. That is not to say Trump is either prophetic or praiseworthy in any sense of the word. According to many credible biographical accounts, Trump has for most of his adult life cut the figure of a self-aggrandizing, social climbing narcissist who has self-

consciously cultivated the role of the bad-boy celebrity, while later in life striding on to the political stage as a contentious harlequin bent on fomenting the pose more like the DC Comics version of the Joker than the revered character of the Italian *commedia dell'arte*. Trump does not by even the most preposterous feat of ingenuity measure up to the more roguish instances of those who have occupied the Oval Office. But that is exactly the point. He cuts the figure of the madman and, after all, madmen are exactly that – “mad”. Nietzsche’s madman has always been both enigmatic and ambivalent. He is mocked in the emporium of acceptable as well as respectable ideas, and it is not clear from either a close reading of the “parable” or Zarathustra’s own “teachings” (“God is dead, now we want the overman to live”¹⁷) what is really implied at the level of social change and cultural transformation. Before Thomas J.J. Altizer’s “gospel of Christian atheism” made Nietzsche’s saying an academic *cause à la mode* in the late 1960s, Zarathustra’s linkage of the death of God to the manifestation of the *Übermensch* could have been readily dismissed as a stroke of Nazi propaganda. That would of course matched the paranoid fantasies of an earlier generation with today’s delusional liberal musings that Trump is the self-engendered *Führer* of a new American Fourth Reich. Is Nietzsche’s madman really the Cassandra-like seer of a fascist future? It is as plausible as the narrative today’s so-called “radical theologians” have made him out to be.

Whatever the madman betokens, there are certain viscera of him in the public persona of President Donald Trump. Furthermore, Nietzsche did not mean for his madman to function as a literary figure begging endless scrutiny. The madman serves mainly as a theatrical intervention, a rowdy staging. He is more like the blind beggar that accosts Madame Bovary toward the end of Flaubert’s classic novel, boldly mirroring while flaunting back to her the very decrepitude of her own soul. Madmen, harlequins, and beggars are rarely perceived by their interlocutors for what they actually are. That is not only the case with Nietzsche’s madman vis-à-vis the people he confronts in the marketplace as well as Bovary’s spectral nemesis, but also with the perniciously performative, über-loathsome arch-fiend rearing up within the outraged progressive gaze that comes across as everything associated with Trump and “Trumpism”. The symptomatology of the politically obsessive neurosis that is the ongoing and tireless quotidian “Trump thing” somehow has succeeded in masking what might be diagnosed perhaps as an index for the collective disintegration of the “soul” of the present-day ruling class in America and the West.

The Neoliberal Context

In my book on neoliberalism I argue, following a range of late modern and contemporary critical theorists, that latter day global capitalism – what has come to be known, generally speaking, as “neoliberalism” – has completely morphed since the mid-nineteenth century in peculiar ways that make it largely unrecognizable to both its familiar apologists and detractors, while paradoxically rendering it ever more amenable to the kind of rigorous analysis Marx offered in both his earlier and later contributions to the field of political economy. In *The German Ideology*, composed in 1846 on the eve of the outbreak of the great European revolution that shook the world, Marx and Engels wrote that “the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling *material* force of society, is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force.”¹⁸ In what can be considered the inaugural and in many respects the most distinct definition of the theory of ideology itself, they added: “the class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production”.

Under neoliberalism, which has in true aporetic fashion developed a “progressive” intellectual “superstructure” (to use Marxist terminology) in order to conceal its regressive economic “substructure”, the distinction between “mental” and “material” production has largely vanished. In essence, the “ruling class” of the present day reveals itself as the class of so-called “knowledge workers”, a locution minted by the famed management theorist Peter Drucker way back in 1959.¹⁹ In my book I characterize the “substructure” of the new ruling class as the “corporate-university-financial-information complex”. I dissect it as a distinctive social class that manipulates the levers of *both* the means of “material’ production”, which in the age of digitized media, computerized investment, a rigorously credentialed professional service industry, and an expansive corporate consortium of digital media in sundry guises, has succeeded in disseminating and inculcating a new “global-civic moralism” which, like the Medieval penitential system, enforces a of self-accusation about one’s discriminatory attitudes toward select marginalized social identities ostensibly aimed at the good of all humankind, all the while inexorably dissolving the dignity and physical livelihoods of a working class of all nationalities, cultures, and

racism. It amounts to what Jean-Joseph Goux in a previous generation named the new “symbolic capitalism.”²⁰

It is also worth noting that “ruling class” does not necessarily mean those who have the most money. One of the most common cavils concerning the theory of “progressive neoliberalism”, as Nancy Fraser has denominated the makeup of the new ruling class in the age of “immaterial labor” and “symbolic capitalism”, is that academics who for the most part superintend its symbol-manufacturing machinery are hardly rich, especially when one takes into account not only the comparative salaries of tenured faculty but the increasing hordes of low-paid and overworked adjuncts who belong with free-lance writers, Uber drivers, and a vast cross-section of service employees to what sociologists nowadays term the “precariat.” My rejoinder is that in Medieval times the Catholic clergy held much the same office, and despite the massive wealth accumulated by the Church itself through both bequests and its psychological extortion of the nobility with the sacraments of grace and the fear of hell, individual priests by profession were supposed to take the vow of poverty. That did not exclude the “pastorate” from the ruling classes. It was quite the opposite, as the bourgeois fury of the Reformation of the Sixteenth century and the anti-clerical rage of the French Jacobins after 1789 shows. If one is responsible for manufacturing and shepherding the “ideas of the ruling class,” one locates oneself smack dab at its epicenter.

Returning to the problem at hand, it is vital, therefore, to ask ourselves what, in truth, the above implies when it comes to making sense out of the “problem”/ “symptom” of Trump and why an increasingly vicious hyperpolarization not only in politics itself, but in values and culture as well, have become the unmistakable signal fire of our times. If one asks a representative of the approximately one half of the American population that loathes Trump and sees him as the living, breathing embodiment of the anti-Christ (the so-called “Resistance”), one will hear that it is of course Trump himself. According to this now familiar narrative, Trump is a classic demagogue with either tacit or explicit authoritarian intentions who has issued not only “dog whistles,” but overt pitches toward everything violent and reactionary coiled deep down with the collective subconscious of the “conservative” and less educated segments of the populace, Hillary Clinton’s “deplorables.” If one inquires of the other half, that is, those who voted for Trump in 2016 and are more likely than not to vote for him again in 2020, one will hear that it is not so much Trump per se, even though there is obviously a sizable segment that adores and idolizes him personally,

comprising the bulk of his routine histrionic political rallies. Instead, or so the argument among the bulk of Trump supporters goes, the man's utterances and behavior may indeed be cringe-worthy, and his personal history and character certainly does not even approach a standard that one might possibly admire, but he at least openly in word and in deed protects us from the other faction, which would gladly seek to destroy us (similar to the argument by which many Italian Jews supported Mussolini before Hitler later forced him to adopt the same policies of extermination).

Interestingly, Michael Hirsh, a senior correspondent and deputy editor of the prestigious – and decidedly “establishment liberal” - magazine *Foreign Policy*, opined during the last week of 2019 at the crest of the U.S. House of Representatives-driven impeachment process that the Democratic Party in the United States has failed to heed the lesson of Trump's meteoric rise in 2016 and complete makeover of the brand of the Republican Party in the first three years of his administration. Hirsh suggests that the Republicans under Trump in the last election “transformed” themselves radically by jettisoning the “old ideologies”, including so-called “Reagonomics” with its emphasis on budget discipline and limited government, that previously had held them together for at least two generations. Just as “hatred of Obama” from 2008-16 failed to win elections for Republicans until Trump crafted the positive, but demagogic message of “make America great again”, so an even more instinctual revulsion among Democrats for the current occupant of the White House cannot carry the day “if they don't find a way to resolve the ideological war that still splits the party.”²¹ Hirsh does not speculate what a Trump-like metamorphosis of the Democratic party might look like, but his argument makes it clear that it would have to be some version of committed economic redistributionism combined with an appeal to the “better angels” of racial pluralism, minus race-shaming, as opposed to the increasingly rabid nativism of its adversaries. In other words, no matter how an identity politics that excludes, or goes so far as to implicitly vilify, the white middle class whites has played in recent years with the Democratic base, it has served as a non-starter when it comes to winning elections.

In other words, the not-so-well camouflaged elitist values, whether they be economic or cultural, that have defined the dominant ideologies of both parties in recent years are sinking rapidly under a global anti-elite “populist” insurgency that assumes a vast spectrum of flamboyant, if not disquieting, guises, but raises up similar kinds of personalities, from Trump in America to Boris Johnson in the United

Kingdom to Narendra Modi in India. Populism historically has fluctuated as well as shape-shifted between right and left throughout modern history, and almost always constitutes a kind of political reaction-formation to complex and often indecipherable seismic shifts in the psycho-social as well as economic fabric of the life of peoples and nations. Its resistance to any straightforward method of typologization, let alone familiar ideological reductivism, hints at a comparison at the collective level with the sorts of obsessive-compulsive patterns of language and behavior, which often defy immediate diagnosis, in the clinical context. But as is the case with any kind of confusing symptomatology that repels straightforward analysis, it also belies more deep-lying complexities that standard “therapeutic” paradigms too readily fail to bring to light. As John Judis notes in his masterful analysis of the variety of contemporary populist upheavals all around the world, “it difficult to understand why what populists say resonates with the greater public, and how they are pointing, however imperfectly, to real problems that the major parties are downplaying or ignoring. By the nature of populism, these campaigns and parties point to problems through demands that are unlikely to be realized in the present political circumstances.”²²

Populism itself belongs to the same symptomatology of which “Trumpism,” whatever that term may actually mean, is merely a localized special case in point. If we return to Freud’s – and in a somewhat different sense Lacan’s as well – notion of the obsession as a seemingly “irrational” defense against the scission of the subject in a desperate attempt to sustain an “incompatible idea”, then both populist enthusiasms and the continuum of elite language practices and affects that serves routinely in the public sphere to foster a demonization of those convictions can be viewed as two sides of the same medallion. However, the medallion itself is not a solid object, but rather a set of paired discs that remain asymptotic to each other while hovering in a vacuum. The two “sides” amount to parallel, but radically divergent (following Freud’s logic, we might even say “hysterical”) systems of enunciation that function as *equally ineffective mechanisms* aimed at accounting for the disjunction between ideation and content.

Writing in *The New Republic* on December 31, 2019, the date which, according to the magazine, signaled an end of the “decade from hell,” Ganesh Sitaraman has argued, in effect, that the global turbulence that had been accelerating during the previous years was the immediate outcome of the “collapse of neoliberalism.” As for the various “events”, which popular progressive narratives attribute to the phantom known as “Trumpism,” Sitaraman declares peremptorily that Donald Trump had

nothing to do with them, insofar as the putative causal factors behind them “were evident prior to the 2016 election.” The confusion of causal nexus with symptomatology in standard psychoanalytic literature (take, for example, Lacan’s principle of the *objet petit a*) is one of the key features of both obsessional and hysteric behavior, not to mention styles of thinking. According to Sitaraman, the inability to comprehend what is happening arises from a complete failure of previously operative ideologies. The failed ideology of the right has been the kind of free market fundamentalism along with the mistaken belief that economic liberalization would inevitably lead to political liberalization, a grand delusion which the rise of China and Russia as formidable authoritarian and military powers from the ashes of Communism has underscored. The failed ideology of the left, according to Sitaraman, boils down to the false belief, which can be traced back to what conservatives misleadingly term the “cultural Marxism” of the late 1960s, that political empowerment of previously marginalized racial, ethnic, or gender-classified human groupings would have the same kind of long-range emancipatory potential as the earlier, social democratic dialectic of class conflict.

Sitaraman observes that “neoliberals on right and left sometimes use identity as a shield to protect neoliberal policies”, a thesis advanced a few years earlier by Fraser in her formulation of the concept of “progressive neoliberalism.” The upshot has been “that some neoliberals hold high the banner of inclusiveness on gender and race and thus claim to be progressive reformers, “even though the outcome “is to leave in place political and economic structures that harm the very groups that inclusionary neoliberals claim to support.” By the same token, old-guard conservatives – both classic “free marketers” and minions of the religious right – incessantly talk about both the values of religious freedom and personal liberty while turning a blind eye to the corporatist takeover of the global economy that has been far more consequential for the extinction of the kinds of private virtues they extol than any form of authoritarian political overreach.²³

The “liberal” social and moral ideal, which with respect to religion can be traced to the Protestant Reformation, politically to the Glorious Revolution of 1689, and economically to the writings of Adam Smith, has indeed been the cultural ballast of American politics for most of the nation’s history. Though it has been for the most part Anglo-Saxon in both its genealogy and its modern evolution, with the British empire in the nineteenth century and American ascendancy in the twentieth it became the de facto measure of international normativity in much the same way that Roman legal

principles together with ideas concerning political authority and sovereignty prevailed throughout much of Western civilization even after the empire had shrunk to a wan shadow of itself. With the collapse of Communism in the late 1980s and early 1990s the socio-ethical touchstones that had historically defined “liberalism” were superimposed upon a planetary filigree of divergent cultural habituses that became arbitrarily stitched together through the predominance of market mechanisms as well as new and sophisticated computational and communication technologies. Strangely, what came to pass was not dissimilar to the Roman Catholic Church in the early Middle Ages where formal Nicene creedal memes were layered over religious sensibilities and practices that remained thoroughly pagan in nature. The upshot was a mutation in the genome of liberalism itself as a political ideology that came to be known as “neoliberalism.” At the “chromosomal” level the mutation corresponds to what Wendy Brown has described as a morphing of *homo politicus* into *homo oeconomicus*.

But what Brown, not to mention others who frequently cite this formula, tend to ignore is that the lifeworld and life choices of *homo oeconomicus* are not necessarily determined by raw “economic” considerations. It is certainly true that neoliberalism itself has relied on such a reductive anthropology in flattening human psychology, as illustrated in the development of so-called “rational choice theory” which, as different commentators have observed in recent years, was instrumental in fostering the kind of policy myopia that led to the Great Recession.²⁴ Yet that myopia in itself diverted attention from the very disconnect between the seamless economic paradigm invoked by neoliberal theorists and the *value cleavage* among the differing class interests that supposedly perform as “rational” actors. Despite the “economicization” of the political sphere under neoliberalism, certain value commitments among certain social class configurations have stubbornly persisted. Furthermore, these value commitments have increasingly come to behave as markers of class distinctions themselves. Hillary Clinton’s description of Trump supporters during the 2016 as a “basket of deplorables” is an infamous example of how a harsh moral judgment concerning voters for the political opposition became entrenched as the “differend,” as Jean-François Lyotard employs the term, for class consciousness.²⁵ Lakoff’s well-known concept of “moral politics” as a methodology for demarcating the cognitive substructures for the ideological passions driving the projects of major parties, especially in the United States, is a case in point.

Lakoff in an important sense has extracted his own “metapolitical” model of collective thought and behavior, interestingly along some of the same lines as the Frankfurt School following the Second World War, from the Freudian scheme of familial relations. The “common sense” of politics on both the right and left, which always remains “unconscious” according to Lakoff, springs from the different ways in which this scheme has been mapped through both personal experience and moral concept formation. The reason is simple, Lakoff says. “The link between family-based morality and politics comes from one of the most common ways we have of conceptualizing what a nation is, namely, as a family”.²⁶ Historically, class and family structures have been differentiated along many of the same lines. The family becomes the locus for both moral development and the evolution world views, derived in large part from childhood images (which Lakoff calls “strict father” and “nurturing parent”) that generate what he calls “radial classifications” spreading outward from their semantic kernel to encompass a whole galaxy of perceptual discriminations. The so-called “cultural wars” are, therefore, simply covert *class wars* in an age when garden variety Marxist “class consciousness” has been suppressed through the dominance of neoliberal social valuations. It is this underlying cognitive disunion that gives rise to competing types of “moral politics” whereby inhabitants of one universe are incapable of comprehending, let alone empathizing with, the positionality of those who dwell within the other one. Finally, it is the essential dissonance of these “incompatible ideas” that enables the obsessive and overdetermined reactions to the discursivity and demeanors of those who dwell within the alternate universe of meaning.

Trump as the “Quilting Point” for A “Heteropolitics”

The figure of Trump, therefore, has become what Lacan calls a *point de capiton* (“quilting point”), where “signified and signifier are knotted together.”²⁷ Lacan derives the concept of the quilting point from mattress-making, in which an upholsterer sews down a button to prevent the stuffing from sloshing around willy-nilly. Lacan utilizes the theories of Ferdinand Saussure in his *Course on General Linguistics* to develop his argument. In the kind of structural linguistics invented by Saussure, language is a chain of differential signifiers in which “meaning” evolves as a progressive displacement of the semantic structure registered by previous iterations.²⁸ Saussure replaced the differential signifier with the traditional word/image/thing triad of classical

semiotics, and it served as the background workings for the linguistic transposition of Husserlian phenomenology, which Jacques Derrida called “deconstruction.” In the Lacanian approach to psychoanalysis the concatenation of signifiers operates not as an emergent cartography of the “real”, but as the process of subject formation in which the “I” finds its capacity for authentic and self-directed speech. It is this odyssey of “subjectivation” that makes psychoanalysis possible in the first place.

However, it is also through the appropriation of the “discourse of the other”, whether that be the parental voice, the linguistic rules for “appropriate” communication, the “demands of society” that subjectivation as an appropriation of the discourse of the other for the sake of self-realization manages to create clarity about one’s own condition, but at the same time to foster lesions and disjunctions in the *affective* relationship between language and experience. Language plows like a moving ship through a vast ocean of indeterminable objects and potential affects, what Lacan characterizes as the sentimental “mass of the current of discourse, a confused mass in which appear units, islands, an image, an object, a feeling, a cry, an appeal.” He comments in Seminar III: “It’s a continuum, whereas underneath is the signifier as a pure chain of discourse, a succession of words, in which nothing is isolable.” At some point the chain of discourse must be firmed up, “quilted”, so that the previous differential values do not spin off into a semiotic abyss. As Lacan points out, “the relationship between the signified and the signifier always appears fluid, always ready to come undone.”²⁹ Lacan cites Freud’s constant reference to the Oedipus Complex as one of the most important examples of how the *point de capiton* functions within the discourse of psychoanalysis as a whole, insofar as it halts the slippage of the roving signifier that goes along with a welter of incontinent and unacknowledged incestual desires. The Oedipus Complex fosters a system of stable semiotic interconnections that otherwise would come unglued if the dangerous liaison of desire and language were somehow given completely free rein. Yet what ultimately underwrites these connections, Lacan proposes quite obliquely in Seminar III, is neither an introjected sense of otherness (the “me” that is recognized as an adjunct of the “I”) nor the “big other”, the internalized symbolic order. It is the ultimate dyad of signifier and signified that goes by the designation of “God”, often associated with the *nom du père*, the “name of the father.”

It is at this particular and distinctive “quilting point” within the discursive galaxy that we might refer to as “death of God” politics that the “problem” of Trump begins to become politically intelligible. What we have is not just a “divisive” (politics is always

divisive, as Carl Schmitt noted long ago), but an irresolvable, increasingly centrifugal and dynamically self-annihilating politics - a *heteropolitics* to speak. As Lacan notes, the slippage of the signifier comes to a pass where the ongoing "sense" generated in the chain of differential signs is in danger of skidding out of control. The danger of this "unchained" differential process, according to Lacan, is always psychosis - and that applies collectively as well. In such an instance the trajectory of the signifier must be braked, although it cannot by any stretch of the imagination be fixated. Lacan asks:

What is the role of the signifier here? Fear is something that is particularly ambivalent. We others, we analysts, aren't unaware of this – it's as much something that drives you on as something that holds you back, it's something that makes you a double being and that, when you express it before a character with whom you want to play at being afraid together, will always place you in the position of a reflection. But there is something else, which looks homonymous – the fear of God.³⁰

This exceedingly opaque passage from Seminar III underscores a still inchoate insight that we may leverage to draw an uninterrupted link between psychoanalysis and what is broadly understood as "theology". Lacan alludes to the proverb that "the fear of YHWH is the beginning of wisdom."³¹ Lacan compares the Hebraic attitude with the pagan one as found in the writings of the Epicureans:

The fear of the gods, from whom Lucretius wants to free his little friends, is something altogether different, a multiform, confused feeling, one of panic. The fear of God, on the other hand, on which a tradition that goes back to Solomon is based, is the principle of wisdom and the foundation of the love of God. Moreover, this tradition is precisely our own.³²

Lacan makes clear that he is not clumsily impressing on to the Freudian theory of drives "a curate's idea," that is, a theological principle. The "fear of God" is not by any means "a signifier that is found everywhere". Lacan argues that is "quite an accomplishment" to have stitched together the semiotic capacity of all human fears and related anxious affects into a single signifier that transmutes them into

something “wholly other”, such as the name YHWH itself. He offers an analogy from the line of a character in a play by Racine.

This famous fear of God completes the sleight of hand that transforms, from one minute to the next, all fears into perfect courage. All fears – *I have no other fear* – are exchanged for what is called the fear of God, which, however constraining it may be, is the opposite of a fear.”³³

Fear is alchemized into “faith,” which is the true beginning of wisdom.

Returning now to Nietzsche, we should keep in mind that what he meant by the “death of God” does not by any remote parallelism imply a theological position. I myself have argued for over four decades now that there can be no such thing as a “death of God theology”, because Nietzsche’s death of God entails “the end of theology.”³⁴ The seemingly inexhaustible popularity of the term even until this day suggests possibly that, contra Lacan, both the expressions “God” and “death of God” have become “curate’s” terminology. It is a terminology that has been reverently preserved over the years in caves like Buddha’s shadow in Nietzsche’s aphorism by those who no longer believe but somehow cling to a curious kind of oxymoronic style of “belief” that disguises their commitment to the immanent ideals of a neoliberal and secular “pastorate”, as Foucault called it, founded on a political spectacle of world prepotency on the part of secular elites.³⁵ If one reads closely Nietzsche’s scattered aphorisms about God’s “death”, it becomes apparent that what has “died” is not the construct of God per se (from which can be adduced virtually any kind of theological apparatus or any arbitrary “lifestyle” of having a “belief in God”), but the “fear of God” in Lacan’s sense that reduces the infinite fluidity of the divine signifier to a logic of semiotic closure that simply pretends to be open to what is intimated in the nameless name YHWH. One no longer “fears” God; therefore, one no longer can pride themselves in possessing the ultimate prowess of “knowing” God.

What happens then within the symbolic register when God is dead and the “fear” of God has been supplanted by the smugness of assertions of God’s death that somehow border on the scholastic? The *point de capiton* now must be located within what Nietzsche dubbed the “Christian-moral view of the world.” That same view is Janus-faced. It may be both religious and non-religious, or Christian and self-

professedly “post-Christian”, as I have insisted over the years in seemingly antithetical contexts. In structural linguistic terms, nevertheless, the signifiers within this “Christian-moral” matrix slide about in contrary directions, coming to rest at opposite “quilting points”, or anchoring their respective differential pathways within non-identical semiotic spaces. This sort of differential between *moralized* “master signifiers” within an immanent frame of social and political orientation creates a traumatic slippage in itself, comparable to the separation of tectonic plates that cause sudden, violent earthquakes. The violence itself of this unspoken “paralogism” within the political imaginary, which governs the attitudes and behavior of every social actor, comes to be expressed in a new train of vicious and vengeful associations that feed upon their own energy and reinforce each other in the direction of what might be considered a kind of “apocalyptic” frenzy.

Trump himself almost unconsciously (and the “unconscious” of course is where the dynamism of these trains of association happen) has aptly exhibited this pattern with his inflammatory rhetoric bordering at times on the nihilistic. As Lakoff himself has emphasized, Trump’s rhetorical technique amounts to a method of “deep framing” of political issues designed to activate unconsciously in his audience an embedded moral world view through use of charged metaphors and repetition of key phrases.³⁶ It is because of this technique that almost subliminally determines through his performance style a visceral clash with the “moral politics” of his adversaries that the slippage between the two frames can appear, depending on one’s own angle of perception, well-nigh catastrophic. This performance style not only shores up the anger his supporters feel toward those who inhabit the other world on account of their repeated denigration of them as profoundly stupid or “immoral”, but simultaneously stokes the rage of his opponents, who through constant repetition of their own affective responses, become incapable of seeing anything beyond the horizons of their respective embedded “deep frame.” The “problem” of Trump is not Trump per se, but the increasingly rigidity and impermeability of the frames themselves, which have now become a true heteropolitics that runs the risk of becoming in some eerie sense an infinitely fractionating “clash of civilizational world pictures” about the meaning of democracy itself. Both these world pictures have historic roots and respectable genealogies that need to be reconciled, if our own looming civilizational calamity is to be averted.

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