

Freud on group psychology and leaders: The case of Donald Trump

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Abstract

What can Freud teach us regarding the grounds of the 'leadership' attributed to the current American president, Donald Trump, if one considers that such 'leadership' presupposes the existence of an identifiable 'group' of which Trump is the putative leader? It is argued that Freud's *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* of 1921 furnishes the conceptual means for clarifying the sense in which Trump can indeed be described as a leader. To be able to show this to be so, the relevant parts of Freud's essay are reconstructed, with particular attention to his claim that what constitutes a group is indissolubly connected with the 'libidinal ties' between a leader and his followers—something he elaborates on with reference to two 'organised' groups, namely the Roman Catholic Church and the army. Freud's claim about the unifying role of a leader in relation to a group, as well as his reminder, that common hatred of something external to the group could also promote unity is considered as far as the relation between Trump and his supporters is concerned, with specific reference to Republican members of the United States Congress and to his 'base' among members of the public. Eventually it is Freud's observations on 'identification' that appears to provide the key to understanding the sense in which Trump may be called a 'leader', specifically that type of identification that pertains to the desire 'to be something'. Drawing on the work of Naomi Klein on Trump, Freud's insights are brought to bear on the question, what it is about Trump that his followers identify with. It is

particularly Klein's insights into the sadistic character of Trump's *The Apprentice* that supplies the clue for articulating the unconscious grounds of Trump's followers identifying with him: insofar as Trump 'disavows' castration (powerlessness) or lack, he embodies an imaginary 'fullness of being' with which they identify.

KEYWORDS

Freud, identification, group psychology, leader, Naomi Klein, Trump

1 | INTRODUCTION

Making sense of the mostly disconcerting support of arguably indefensible actions on the part of Donald Trump, the current 'president' of the United States (e.g. his attempt to bribe the president of Ukraine to engage in a compromising investigation of a political opponent), by members of the public and by Republican members of Congress, more specifically of the US Senate, calls for a fundamental theoretical approach. Although one could always address this at the level of 'common sense' or everyday discourse—the way Trump's actions have largely been approached in the media—it is perhaps time to elaborate on it from a conceptually rich perspective. Several theoretical approaches are possible, for example that of psychoanalytical thinker, Kristeva (2000, p. 1), framed in terms of her recuperative concept of 'revolt' as a category to identify both the pseudo-revolt of Trump's supporters against the political 'establishment', as well as the 'revolt' proper which his behaviour calls for. Then there are the fecund critical-theoretical principles underlying Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's early Critical Theory (2002, pp. 94–136), in terms of which Trump's perversion of rationality might be identified as the nadir of reason in the early 21st century, but in my view the most productive heuristic and theoretical angle on these events is found in Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory.

Anyone familiar with the discipline that enables one to understand the often unconscious motives behind human behaviour, namely psychoanalysis, would know that such motivations are often not easily or openly perceptible, and not straightforwardly subject to rational argument, because they do not necessarily present themselves to conscious scrutiny. This is why one has to have recourse to psychoanalytic thinking, which enables one to come to grips with a phenomenon that would otherwise remain elusive, in this case the ostensibly incomprehensible support for a person who, from a rationally defensible perspective, may appear to be an enormous embarrassment to the American people, and a stain on the office of President.

2 | FREUD ON GROUP PSYCHOLOGY, LEADERS AND IDENTIFICATION

In light of the preceding remarks, the interpretation of the phenomenon briefly alluded to above, namely the support that Donald Trump has received, and still receives from certain groups of people in the United States, would arguably be seriously lacking, or incomplete, without invoking Freud's *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* of 1921 (Freud, 2011a, pp. 3763–3834). The question prompted by such support seems to me to be the same one that Freud set out to answer a century ago, namely: why do *groups*—in this case, not only members of the American public, but also particularly a group of Republicans in the American Congress, that is, the House of Representatives and Senate—sometimes behave in such strikingly different ways compared to *individuals*? Freud

was not the only author reflecting on this issue at the time just after the First World War, which had demonstrated the importance of understanding group behaviour—it is no accident that one of the two highly organised groups that Freud discusses here is the army. In his text he takes due cognisance of some of the important thinkers who had written on group behaviour before him and, as any good researcher should do, first weighs up their contributions carefully before either showing why it should be discounted or what he wishes to retain from it before forging ahead with his own investigation. In the course of considering the contributions of a number of thinkers, Freud distinguishes between ‘unorganised’ (or random) and ‘organised’ groups, and adds what he regards as a crucial element ignored by other writers, namely ‘libidinal ties’ among the members of groups, ties through ‘identification’ with ‘leaders’ (a significant concept in this context, in contrast with ‘masters’) and with one another, as well as focussing on the relevance of suggestibility and hypnosis.

The author whose work on the ‘group mind’ Freud (2011a, pp. 3768–3776) refers to most approvingly (before extending it with his own ideas), Le Bon, characterises it, first, by insisting that a group’s collective behaviour is completely distinct from that of the individuals comprising it—generally, individuals in groups lose ‘higher’ modes of functioning in favour of more regressive behaviour. According to Le Bon, in contrast with individual behaviour, groups are ‘impulsive, changeable and irritable’, ‘led...by the unconscious’, un-premeditated, feel omnipotent, are credulous, uncritical, do not doubt themselves, incline to extremes, want to be ‘ruled’ by strong masters, lack the inhibitions of individuals, show signs of regression to mental primitivity (like tolerating contradictions, as in the case of the unconscious, as Freud reminds one; p. 3774), are susceptible to the ‘magical power of words’ instead of reason, and (like neurotics) desire illusions instead of truth (something that may seem to be particularly relevant here, insofar as it seems to apply to Trump’s supporters, especially in the American Senate, foremost among them the Republican leader of Senate, namely Mitch McConnell). As Freud approvingly comments on Le Bon’s findings (2011a, p. 3775): ‘...in the mental operations of a group the function of testing the reality of things falls into the background in comparison with the strength of wishful impulses with their affective cathexis’. This observation on Freud’s part will be prove to be highly pertinent to instances of ignoring incontrovertible evidence of wrongdoing on Trump’s part in favour of the ‘wishful impulses’ of his supporters, as I shall show below.

Freud’s criticism of Le Bon begins (2011a, p. 3768) with his insistence that Le Bon overlooks the fact that there must be ‘something’ that unites the individuals in the group in the first place. His own answer to this question is twofold: Le Bon overlooks the important unifying role of ‘leaders’ (2011a, pp. 3776, 3788–3792), and most importantly—after examining the structure of two highly organised groups (church and army)—Freud corrects and amplifies all the theories he has considered by positing *libido* (2011a, pp. 3784 and 3786) as the most significant unifying force in the psychic functioning of groups (which must be presupposed to explain phenomena such as suggestibility and so-called ‘contagion’ in groups). Freud makes it clear that ‘libido’ here refers to love or Eros in the encompassing sense, which includes strong emotional ties, such as friendship and the fellowship ties that bind people in organised or interest-sharing groups together in relations of mutual loyalty. To the degree that a group (of which there are many kinds, varying in durability and organisation) displays a cohesion of some kind, libidinal ties are present, but importantly, if something should occur to weaken those libidinal or emotional ties, the (organised or historically cohesive) group’s functioning would be fundamentally disrupted—for instance in the form of ‘panic’ (in the case of an army, where it may result from a leader’s sudden absence or death), or in the eruption of ‘acts of violence’ (2011a, pp. 3790–3792). It follows that, should someone leave a highly organised group, such as the Roman Catholic Church or the army (the two such groups Freud focuses on), he or she would risk being persecuted (Freud, 2011a, p. 3787), and he claims that the leader’s libidinal role—unifying members of the group by the ‘love’ (or emotional bond) between such a leader and members of the group—explains the lack of freedom of action on the part of individuals in the group. After all, the individual is enmeshed in twofold emotional ties in the group (Freud, 2011a, p. 3789), namely (‘vertically’) with the leader, as well as (‘horizontally’) with fellow-members. Apart from the unifying libidinal role of the leader, in Freud’s view, he points out (2011a, p. 3793) that hatred against a particular institution or person might operate in a unifying manner, too—something that seems pertinent to the present investigation. Provisionally one might say that in Trump’s case it seems to be a combination of such hatred

against his predecessor, Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton and the Democratic Party, as well as the so-called 'deep state', on his part as well as that of his so-called 'base' (discussed below), that imparts such ostensible unity to the latter. In relation to Trump one can point to the split between different groups of Republicans—some (the majority in the American Senate, e.g.) supporting him, and others (e.g. the so-called Lincoln group) opposing, or even displaying hatred towards him (more on this below). Freud's observation (2011a, p. 3795), that the 'normal' mutual intolerance among people vanishes when a group is formed around a leader, is similarly relevant here.

The decisive question that this raises is: does Freud's account of the emotional or libidinal ties between leaders and the members of a group, as well as among the members themselves, apply to Trump and his followers in the American Congress and the public at large? The answer to this question must be informed by what one learns from Freud, and firstly insofar as he sets aside the possibility that the libidinal (emotional) bonds may rest upon the pursuit of overtly sexual aims (Freud, 2011a, p. 3796). For this reason, as well as the consideration, that contemporary political groupings (such as the US Congress) cannot be regarded as being synonymous with the Roman Catholic Church or the army as understood by Freud, the most pertinent part of Freud's essay on group psychology for gaining insight into Trump's character and his relations with his supporters concerns his remarks on 'identification'—'the earliest expression of an emotional tie with another person' (2011a, pp. 3797–3798). In the first place Freud is thinking specifically of such an emotional bond as that on the part of a little boy with his father (although he admits that the same pattern would obtain in the case of a little girl, 'with the necessary substitutions'). Here Freud explains that the boy's interest assumes the form of taking 'his father as his ideal', that is, as his 'model'. That this is bound to complicate things as the boy grows older, can be expected in light of the Oedipus complex, insofar as the feelings involved with the latter—where the boy experiences the father as an unwelcome competitor for the mother's affection—are bound to conflict with those emotional ties of an identificatory character on the boy's part, which already entail the unconscious wish to replace the father in everything he does, and are now applied to his relationship with the mother (Freud, 2011a, pp. 3797–3798). The difference between these two distinct kinds of desire, Freud reminds one, is that identification pertains to the ego as 'subject', while (for the boy) the relationship with the mother is one of 'sexual object-choice'—as part of the Oedipus complex. He formulates it (identification) succinctly as entailing 'what one would like to be', and the sexual object-choice of someone as 'what one would like to have' (2011a, p. 3798). This will be discussed in greater detail below in relation to Trump and his followers or 'base'.

Secondly, Freud (2011a, p. 3798) elaborates on instances of identification where it is manifested in certain hysterical symptoms, such as when a girl develops her mother's cough, which signifies her Oedipal guilt for wanting to replace her mother in relation to her father; in such forms, where repression again functions, 'the ego assumes the characteristics of the object'. For present purposes, however, the last, and most interesting kind of identification of the three that Freud describes concerns unconscious wishes to be in the position of the person with whom one identifies—as evinced, for example, in the displacement of the identification on to an emotion displayed by the person with whom one identifies—but, importantly, in the absence of any 'object-relation to the person who is being copied'. In Freud's words (2011a, p. 3799): 'The mechanism is that of identification based upon the possibility or desire of putting oneself in the same situation'—regardless of the fact that there is no 'object-relation' (such as personal love or sexual desire) with the imitated person. This resonates with something that Le Bon (whose views, in Freud's reading, were discussed earlier) perceives as being important for exercising leadership, namely, 'prestige', which is 'recognizable by its capacity for evoking suggestion' (Freud, 2011a, pp. 3776, 3782). It is not really given much credence by Freud, although I believe that—given Le Bon's claim that personal prestige is partly based on 'success'—in Trump's case there may be a connection between his 'prestige' as putative 'successful businessman' and the leadership position attributed to him by his followers in the United States (more on this below). Keeping in mind the first two kinds of identification—the boy identifying with his father as 'ideal', and the ego temporarily displaying certain attributes of the object identified with—Freud's summary of the third type of identification provides fertile grounds for elaboration in relation to the question of Trump as 'leader' (2011a, pp. 3799–3800):

...it may arise with any new perception of a common quality shared with some other person who is not an object of the sexual instinct. The more important this common quality is, the more successful may this partial identification become, and it may thus represent the beginning of a new tie.

We already begin to divine that the mutual tie between members of a group is in the nature of an identification of this kind, based upon an important emotional common quality; and we may suspect that this common quality lies in the nature of the tie with the leader.

What one may gather from Freud's pioneering insights on group psychology when these are related to the "leadership" of Donald Trump is a complex matter, as will be demonstrated below.

3 | TRUMP AS 'LEADER'

What can we learn from Freud that would enlighten us about Trump insofar as he can be considered a 'leader' in relation to an identifiable group (or groups)? Quite a lot, I believe. First there is the question of *libidinal* ties among members of a group, and in Trump's case, this would probably apply primarily to 'organised' groups such as Republicans in the American Senate and the House of Representatives, although 'unorganised' groups, like those random collections of supporters at election campaign rallies, would also have to be taken into account. Compared to the two groups that Freud singles out—the Church and the army—these would not be nearly as tight-knit, so one may reasonably wonder if libidinal, or emotional, ties could indeed be at stake here. However, I would argue that there is evidence in the affirmative, particularly in cases where groups of people have shown, in their behaviour, that they support him on specific—sometimes highly controversial—issues.

Take the issue of Trump's alleged attempt to enlist the help of the Ukrainian president, Volodymyr Zelensky, in his contest with democratic rival, Joe Biden, by producing evidence to the effect that Biden and his son, Hunter, engaged in illicit activities in Ukraine—an issue that resulted in the successful bid, by the Democratic Party, to impeach Trump in the House of Representatives of the United States Congress. Significantly, this was overturned in the Republican-dominated Senate, largely along party lines (BBC, 2020):

Over two weeks in January and February 2020, the Senate held a trial. A Senate vote requires a two-thirds majority to convict, so a guilty verdict was always unlikely given that Mr Trump's party controls the chamber.

And this is how it came to pass. Mr Trump was cleared—by 52 votes to 48 on one count, and 53 votes to 47 on the other.

From this information it is evident that, although (as remarked earlier) his supporters could arguably not be nearly as close-knit and cohesive as the Church or the army in Freud's analysis, there was sufficient unity among Republicans to support Trump. This was *despite* apparently incontrovertible evidence (see BBC, 2020; also the exhaustive, well-documented Wikipedia [1] summary of the Ukraine scandal) that he had indeed sought Zelensky's help in discrediting Biden, even to the point where he allegedly made an amount of \$391 million military aid to Ukraine conditional on Zelensky's cooperation regarding the Bidens. Nevertheless, faced by all the evidence that led to finding Trump guilty of the impeachment charges brought against him by the Democrat-dominated House of Representatives (where Republicans opposed the motion of impeachment of Trump), he was acquitted by the Republican-controlled Senate. Two questions have to be addressed in the light of this ostensibly unified Republican rallying behind Trump: are there grounds for claiming that Trump's supporters in Congress (and among the American public generally) do not match Freud's depiction of a libidinally or emotionally cohesive group like

the Church or army? And secondly, if there is indeed evidence to this effect, why did Trump—given Freud's account, set out earlier—nevertheless enjoy significant support (by and large, even if not unanimously) at both House and Senate level, as well as, more broadly, among members of the public?

The first evidence of lack of complete solidarity on the part of the Republican party in Congress came in May of 2017 already, when two Republican representatives in the House—Justin Amash and Carlos Curbelo—moved that Trump be impeached on grounds of his obstruction of justice (Wikipedia [2]) in relation to possible Russian interference in the presidential election of 2016. After reading the relevant report by former FBI director, Robert Mueller, on the question of a possible cover-up by Trump or any of his presidential officials regarding possible Russian interference in the 2016 election, Amash in May 2019 reaffirmed his earlier view that Trump had committed impeachable offences (Wikipedia [2]), again demonstrating that Trump's support among Republicans in the American Congress was not total. From this one may infer that the 'obedience' encountered on the part of members of a group, according to Freud's account (2011, p. 2819), is largely absent from the relationship between Trump and Republicans, at least in the sense of virtual unconditionality; it operates minimally to the extent that the leaders of the Republicans in the House and in Senate, respectively, can demand of party representatives to 'obey' expectations, if not instructions, to vote a certain way. This is demonstrated by the fact that, in December 2019, the leader of the Republican majority in Senate, Mitch McConnell, declared his 'wish' that all Republican Senate members should exonerate Trump of both charges on which he had been impeached by the Democrat-dominated House, which *most* of them in fact did on 5 February 2020 (Wikipedia [3]). The exception was Republican Senator Mitt Romney, who voted in favour of finding Trump guilty on the charge of 'abuse of power', despite earlier indications that a small minority among Republicans might follow suit, including Republican Senator Susan Collins (*The Washington Post*, 2020). Hence, by and large, Trump's Republican colleagues at House and Senate levels, respectively, could be said to be guilty of what Freud (2011a, p. 3775) found typical of groups (as distinct from individuals), namely yielding to their 'wishful impulses', instead of 'testing the reality of things' (discussed earlier).

Secondly, regarding evidence that Trump's support among Republicans in society at large is not unanimous, one might point to the Republican group opposing Trump, known as the Lincoln Project. Paradigmatic of their determination to prevent Trump from being re-elected at the end of 2020 is a political advertisement (Vakil, 2020; see also Papenfus, 2020), they recently made public on several platforms, cleverly titled 'Mourning in America'—a verbal play on a 1984 political advertisement by Ronald Reagan as part of his re-election bid, titled 'Morning in America'. In contrast to the 'good times ahead', hinted at in Reagan's advertisement, The Lincoln Project's 'Mourning in America' elaborates on reasons for 'mourning', such as the thousands of people who have died in America since the outbreak of Covid-19, which Donald Trump was completely unprepared for, and the perilous state of the US economy under his presidency during the pandemic. A spokesperson for the Lincoln Project sums it up like this (Vakil, 2020): 'Trump and his administration failed at every turn to take the response to COVID-19 seriously until it was too late; now we face a collective mourning for the America we once knew'. In light of this evidence it seems safe to say that Trump is not a 'leader' in the sense ascribed to the concept by Freud in the context of the Church and the army, as far as enduring emotional ties between the leader and 'his' followers are concerned. Hence the decisive question: are there any remaining grounds on which one can claim that Freud's work in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (2011) imparts intelligibility to Donald Trump's role as putative 'leader'? I believe this to be the case, for reasons outlined below.

4 | IDENTIFICATION: TRUMP'S CONSTITUENCY, OR 'BASE'

Faced with the second question posed earlier, concerning the grounds for Republican lawmakers, as well as considerable numbers of the public, supporting Trump despite overwhelming evidence brought against him in the House of Representatives during the impeachment hearing, there is the matter of *identification* (briefly raised earlier). This is described by Freud (2011a, p. 3796) as another 'mechanism for emotional ties', which arguably

brings clarity to the relationship between Trump and his supporters. Not all the instances of identification, outlined by Freud, seem to fit the relationship between Trump and those who demonstrably identify with him, however. Recall that Freud distinguishes among three types of identification (discussed earlier)—pertaining to ‘what one would like to *be*’—of which the third kind (Freud, 2011a, pp. 3799–3800) was highlighted as being of particular relevance for the present investigation (although the first type, modelled on the boy’s desire to be like his father, i. e., taking his father as his ‘ideal’, may also appear to be relevant in metaphorical terms where Trump is concerned; 2011a, pp. 3797–3798). More explicitly, what seems to me to apply most clearly to Trump’s ‘base’ in relation to him is Freud’s characterisation of *the third variety of identification as being founded on unconscious desires to be in the position of the individual(s) with whom one identifies*. I would argue that it is in this sense that Trump’s followers ‘identify’ with him—both as members of organised groups such as the US Senate, and more broadly as participants in Trump’s signature ‘Make America Great Again’ events (mainly election and other kinds of pro-Trump rallies all over America).

But why would these people identify with Trump, in this way constituting him as their chosen ‘leader’? The first important reason for this is related to what Manuel Castells—probably the best-known sociologist and social theorist in the world—has observed, post-financial crisis (of 2008), in response to a question by BBC interviewer Paul Mason concerning the ‘rise of new economic cultures’ in the wake of the crisis, namely (Castells, 2012): ‘It is fundamental because it triggers a crisis of trust in the two big powers of our world: the political system and the financial system’. In other words, as Castells reiterated: ‘People don’t trust where they put their money and they don’t trust those who they delegate in terms of their vote’. Keeping in mind that Castells’s and his research team circle the globe to obtain these findings, it is no exaggeration to say that the rise of Donald Trump to the (for him unlikely) position of American president is intimately related to this global mistrust in politicians and bankers.

But does his election to this position not make of him a politician, too? Yes and no. Yes, because he obviously has to engage in daily actions which are unavoidably ‘political’, such as communicating with members of Congress and Senate, or with ‘political’ supporters, as well as with other politicians globally. No, because Trump has gone out of his way to distance himself from the so-called deep state—an alleged network of professional politicians, security clusters such as the FBI, media and financial institutions supposedly hell-bent on removing him from office—in this way maintaining the trust and support of his loyal ‘base’, the members of which positively hate the ‘political class’ (see e.g., Conservative Video Alerts, 2020; Christian Conservative Daily, 2020; Patriotic Times, 2020; Patriot Powered News Network, 2020), of which former president, Barack Obama, as well as Hillary Clinton, is the metonymic representation. This is demonstrated in the oft-repeated ‘hate ritual’ at Trump rallies, where he holds Clinton up as the epitome of everything that is despicable about the political class of Capitol Hill, and the crowd responds with ‘Lock her up! Lock her up!’ (Rupar, 2020). (This is a reference to, among other alleged misdemeanours, her supposedly illicit use of a private e-mail server while she was the US secretary of state; she was cleared by the FBI before the election where she won the popular vote, while Trump won the presidency because of the state-oriented, relative weight-distributing mechanisms of the electoral college system.)

When considering Freud’s description of the third type of identification—unconsciously identifying with someone in whose position one desires to be—this does not seem to be sufficient motivation, however; except if one construes it as a desire, on the part of those comprising his ‘base’, to be in Trump’s position of power regarding actions against his, and their, adversaries in the putative ‘deep state’. After all, those who identify with him are not capable of resisting this ‘foe’ directly (except possibly through individual ‘rogue’ actions), but only indirectly, through Trump as their ‘leader’. The question remains, however, why he should be seen by these people as being in a position to defeat the hated political class. Recalling Le Bon’s remarks (Freud, 2011a, pp. 3776 and 3782) about ‘prestige’, based on ‘success’, being an important aspect on the part of a leader with noteworthy influence over a group—one might say that, in the eyes of Trump’s ‘base’, he is a worthy champion because he possesses a certain ‘prestige’. After all, Trump is arguably *perceived* by his supporters as being a successful *businessman* (in contrast to a professional politician), whether or not this is really the case (Klein, 2017, pp. 67 and 71). Prestige is therefore linked, in his case, to the admiration one feels for someone who represents success in a valued domain, keeping in

mind that popular American culture is centred on the highly prized idea of 'celebrity' (see Strumska-Cylwik & Olivier, 2018)—a category that fits Trump like a glove (Klein, 2017, pp. 37–38). In the light of this, the kind of identification in question here can be demonstrably associated with Trump's 'base' insofar as it has to do with 'idealising' Donald Trump as supposedly hyper-successful businessman before his ascension to the presidency, and here Naomi Klein is an indispensable source of insight.

5 | TRUMP AND PERVERSION

In her penetrating investigative book on Trump's significance for the present era, Naomi Klein (2017, p. 17) provides a succinct account of the 'Trump phenomenon':

This book's argument, in a nutshell, is that Trump, extreme as he is, is less an aberration than a logical conclusion—a pastiche of pretty much all the worst trends of the past half century. Trump is the product of powerful systems of thought that rank human life based on race, religion, gender, sexuality, physical appearance, and physical ability—and that have systematically used race as a weapon to advance brutal economic policies since the earliest days of North American colonization and the transatlantic slave trade. He is also the personification of the merger of humans and corporations—a one-man megabrand, whose wife and children are spin-off brands, with all the pathologies and conflicts of interest inherent in that. He is the embodiment of the belief that money and power provide license to impose one's will on others, whether that entitlement is expressed by grabbing women or grabbing the finite resources from a planet on the cusp of catastrophic warming. He is the product of a business culture that fetishizes 'disruptors' who make their fortunes by flagrantly ignoring both laws and regulatory standards. Most of all, he is the incarnation of a still-powerful free-market ideological project—one embraced by centrist parties as well as conservative ones—that wages war on everything public and commonly held, and imagines corporate CEOs as superheroes who will save humanity.

Several things may strike one here as throwing light on the question of the grounds for members of his 'base' identifying with Trump. It is no accident that the profile of a Trump supporter is that of a (usually white) 'conservative', which corresponds with Klein's claim (above) that Trump is the 'product of powerful systems of thought that rank human life based on race, religion, gender, sexuality, physical appearance, and physical ability'. Trump unapologetically advances these interests, which are also those of his constituency, which, reciprocally, supports him as the powerful individual embodiment of such values. It is hardly difficult for someone to establish an emotional tie by way of identifying with someone in a leadership position like that of the American president, particularly if he is perceived as being the adversary of a common enemy—the political class, which is associated with the erosion of supposedly traditional, patriarchal, race-oriented, homophobic American values. It has often been said that nothing binds people (or groups) together like having a common foe; this is certainly the case as far as his constituency's identification with Trump is concerned. In a recent article on American individualism and the country's response to the coronavirus pandemic, Andrew (2020) reminds readers that: 'Americans have resented centralized power since they dumped tea in Boston Harbor. Many still bristle when they think politicians are stepping on their freedoms—even in a pandemic'. Ironically, it is this ingrained American individualism that comprises fertile ground for conservative Americans identifying with Trump, who is recognised as a supreme individualist (and a heroic 'disruptor', to boot, as Klein indicates, above)—as he has demonstrated since the start of his election campaign until today, in the fourth year of his presidency, never doing things in the conventional manner, as expected of a 'career politician'.

In the excerpt, above, Klein also alludes to Trump being heir to the use of 'race as a weapon to advance brutal economic policies', which has to be read in conjunction with her statement, that he is 'the personification of the merger of humans and corporations', given the fact that the vast majority of American businesses are white male-owned, even if some businesses are owned by people of colour (Soergel, 2016). This marks another site where conservative Americans would find emotional resonance with Trump; while many, if not most, of his 'base' are working-class Americans, Trump seems to represent to them the ideal of a corporate success story worthy of emulation—or perhaps 'worthy of being *desired*' is more accurate, recalling Freud's depiction of the third kind of identification as one involving desire for whom (or what) one would like to *be*, or for what someone else *is*—in contrast with what one *has*, which operates at the level of sexual object-relations. This is of great significance in the case of identifying with Trump—after all, realistically speaking, how many people among his 'base' could ever hope to become billionaires? But identifying with Trump entails the *unconscious* wish to *be* him, or perhaps rather, *like* him as ideal type. Trump becomes their model.

Klein (2017, p. 55) casts light on this strange phenomenon in a chapter tellingly titled 'The Mar-A-Lago Hunger Games'—a reference to Trump's estate in Palm Beach, Florida, in conjunction with the film, *The Hunger Games* (Ross, 2012), where individuals (so-called 'tributes') have to compete against one another in a kind of propitiatory gladiatorial struggle to death for the entertainment of the rich and powerful in a futuristically conceived dystopia. Referring to the reality television show (*The Apprentice*) that made Trump famous, in which he ruthlessly pits several aspiring young wannabe business types against one another, and concludes each episode with the same statement directed at the participant who is eliminated in that particular episode—'You're fired!'—Klein writes (2017, p. 55):

Trump's mastery of the genre was pivotal in the construction of his branded empire and it was essential to his successful run for president. And now Trump is using those same skills he learned on *The Apprentice*—the belief that he can cut, edit, and reshape reality to fit a largely pre-scripted, self-aggrandizing outcome—to transform not just the White House, but large parts of the world.

The real significance of this resemblance between Trump's handling of his presidency and the way he approached the reality show becomes apparent where Klein, drawing a connection between reality shows like the hugely popular *Survivor* and *The Apprentice*, writes (2017, p. 56):

The whole genre—the alliances, the backstabbing, the one person left standing—was always a kind of capitalist burlesque. Before *The Apprentice*, however, there was at least the pretext that it was about something else: how to survive in the wilderness, how to catch a husband, how to be a housemate. With Donald Trump's arrival, the veneer was gone. *The Apprentice* was explicitly about the race to survive in the cutthroat "jungle" of late capitalism...

She follows this up by unmasking the previously covered-up truth about capitalism (Klein, 2017, p. 58):

What's interesting about this particular piece of televised class warfare, which aired in 2007, is that the pretense sold to a previous generation—capitalism was going to create the best of all possible worlds—is completely absent. No: this is a system that generates a few big winners and hordes of losers, so you'd better make damn sure you are on the winning team.

One might perhaps expect that audiences would find Trump's verbal behaviour in *The Apprentice*—which made the internecine economic struggle at the centre of capitalism so conspicuous that only an anaesthetised viewer could possibly have missed it—objectionable, but clearly (judging by the show's popularity) and tellingly, it did not. Viewers continued being glued to their television sets even when they were encouraged, by the example of the show's participants, to activate their most merciless and selfish inner selves, regardless of what other sources of

moral principles or codes—such as religion and philosophical ethics—taught in this regard (Klein, 2017, pp. 56–57). Particularly noteworthy—if nauseating—is what Klein (2017, p. 57) describes as the show's (i.e., Trump's) 'underlying cruelty' that became increasingly 'sadistic', as embodied in the contrasting accommodation facilities provided to the 'winning' and the 'losing' team, respectively. While the former had every conceivable luxury showered on them—like champagne around the pool and meetings with celebrities—the latter, called the 'have-nots' by Trump, were relegated to living in tents with no electricity, and eating from paper plates in what was dubbed 'Trump trailer park' (Klein, 2017, p. 57). To rub it in that, in his worldview, there are only 'winners' and 'losers', Trump told the tent-dwellers in one episode that 'life's a bitch' (Klein, 2017, p. 57), presumably to motivate them in their efforts to exchange places with the 'winning' team in the mansion. Klein (p. 57) highlights the irony of this flagrant promotion of an economic system that is at the root of the glaring socio-economic inequalities of contemporary society where she writes:

In other words, Trump and Burnett [producer of *The Apprentice*] deliberately created a microcosm of the very real and ever-widening inequalities outside the show, the same injustices that have enraged many Trump voters—but they played those inequalities for kicks, turning them into a spectator sport.

The fact that the very same Trump voters supported his presidential bid despite their ire in the face of the gaping chasm between rich and poor today, emphasises the counter-intuitive, if not paradoxical mechanism at work in the process of identification. These people identified with billionaire businessman Trump as their preferred 'leader', that is—given the unconscious psychic mechanism described by Freud—as their 'ideal' or 'model', insofar as this identification was (and still is) an expression of their desire to *be* (like) something, or someone, in this case Trump. And yet, rationally speaking, it should have been glaringly obvious to them that he represents precisely the inequality that they found unacceptable. How is this possible?

The first thing to recall is that identification is fundamentally an unconscious process that has nothing to do with rational behaviour. Secondly, it is no accident that Klein, quoted above, used the terms, 'cruelty' and 'sadistic' to describe *The Apprentice*, and by implication, Trump. She might, with equal validity, have used the concept 'perverse', given that, for Freud (2011b, p. 1484), sadism, or deriving pleasure from inflicting pain on others, is the 'most common and the most significant of all the perversions'—which, it should be noted, according to Freud manifests itself first and foremost in the sphere of sexuality. He also claims, however, that it is subject to sublimation, that is, to being expressed in culturally transformed ways (Freud, 2011c, p. 1387), which seems to me to accommodate Trump's sadistic treatment of the 'losers' in *The Apprentice*, in so far as it has no direct, sexually perverse aims, but assumes an economically sublimated guise. But its significance does not end there. Ian Parker (2011, p. 49) points to an important connection between perversion and fetishism in the later Freud's work: 'Freud...late in his work saw perversion as a consequence of the 'disavowal' of castration in which, in place of the mother's missing phallus, a fetish is installed'. What are the implications, for the present theme, of Freud's (2011d, p. 4536) insight that fetishism, as manifestation of perversion, amounted to the 'disavowal' or refusal of 'castration'? Translating such denial of 'castration' (i.e., powerlessness) into a Lacanian lexicon throws more light upon it, insofar as, in Lacanian terms, 'lack' is constitutive of the 'desiring' subject (Parker, 2011, p. 56). Therefore the fetishist's denial of 'lack' manifests itself in the 'installation' of a fetish as a substitute for the mother's supposed (missing) 'penis', in Freud's terminology (2011d, pp. 4535–4536)—recalling that the Lacanian counterpart for this, the 'phallus', is the signifier that guarantees the equivalence between 'mother' and 'father', that is, between what they represent (see Lacan 1957/1958, p. 162). Putting it differently, the *fetish*, in replacing the phallus (the symbolic representation of the fullness and power which will always elude the human subject, male or female), offers the assurance that, in Parker's (2011, p. 49) words, there is 'no lack in any subject'. But because the phallus is unattainable, the pervert has to make do with a fetish of some kind to hide the gap where the (mother's) penis—that is, phallus—should be.

How does this apply to Trump as someone who, in Klein's view, has displayed perverse pleasure in the misfortunes of the losing team in *The Apprentice*? Following the connections, one might expect to perceive indications of this in some fetish on his part—something that would function as a screen blotting out his all-too-human 'lack' of power. It is Jacques Lacan's revision of Freud's notion of perversion that provides the clue to answering this question (Evans, 1996, pp. 141–143). In one of Lacan's (1991, pp. 221–222) formulations of perversion as 'clinical structure' he claims that, unlike the hysterical subject, who questions the (conventional) 'symbolic order' of society (epitomised in self-described 'democratic socialist', Bernie Sanders), the perverse subject is the personification of this symbolic order. One might say that the pervert brings out the 'true colours' of society, which are usually obscured by a mixture of hypocrisy, suppression and repression. In this sense, the Marquis de Sade (1740–1814), who scandalised 18th-century society with his literary depictions of cruelty in sexual relations (e.g., in his notorious novel, *The 120 Days of Sodom*; 1904), was a pervert insofar as he exposed the repressed, or hidden longings (such as lust and cruelty, perhaps obliquely anticipating Freud's *Eros* and *Thanatos*, respectively) on the part of the members of a society that, at the time, were offered a distorted mirror image of themselves as creatures of 'reason'. From this perspective the historical Enlightenment represents a hypertrophy of reason, which De Sade perversely 'corrected'—Lacan (2006, p. 646) uses the term, 'completed', referring to De Sade's *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, which appeared 8 years after Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*, the paradigm of rational, universalistic, deontological ethics. In so doing, De Sade reminded the era that human beings are not only creatures of reason, but also (arguably more fundamentally) of the flesh, with all its imperatives and vicissitudes, as well—something that, although repressed, has always been part and parcel of social life, and that he brought out into the open mercilessly.

Applied to Trump as 'pervert', this means that he can be seen as the fetishistic personification of the symbolic order in a similar way—that is, of the symbolic order's 'true colours' (regarding cruel economic practices), as it were, but with the important qualification, that what he represents is the conventional symbolic order as 'phallus', which stands for the (imaginary American) 'fullness of being'. It is therefore not surprising to see in Evans's (1996, p. 142) comment on Lacan's conception of perversion a mirror image of Trump: 'While neurosis is characterised by a question, perversion is characterised by the lack of a question...Thus it is extremely rare for a perverse subject to demand analysis...' This is abundantly evident in Trump's persistent refusal to admit any shortcomings on his part. In this manner Trump's behaviour amounts to a way of disavowing or denying the 'lack' that characterises every subject—something that is affirmed every time he assures the American public that what he has done (regarding the performance of the American economy under his presidency, the telephone conversation with the Ukrainian president, or his questionable role in the American response to the coronavirus, e.g.) is 'perfect'. Small wonder his 'base' identifies with him, or what he represents, namely the (unattainable) ideal of *perfect* 'Americanness'.

6 | CONCLUSION: IDENTIFYING WITH AN IMPOSSIBLE 'DREAM'

More generally, when applied to Trump's politics, fetishism as expression of sadism means that he refuses to see the symbolic order of American society as 'lacking' (at least in principle); everything is really 'perfect' (the 'phallus' or fullness of being), except that this is (putatively) only the case where *he* leaves his stamp on some aspect of social or economic life: under the tutelage of his leadership, that is, there would be no shortage of anything. Put differently, because this fullness of being that Trump identifies with at the imaginary level is really unattainable, he has to resort to verbal fetishes of some kind, which is why he customarily makes pronouncements like 'Make America great again!' (something concretised in the multitude of red MAGA baseball caps that his followers wear). Every time he uses an expression that indicates the replacement of a lack or shortfall of some kind in American society with contrasting abundance, it functions metonymically as a fetish representing the (inaccessible) phallus of American plenitude or fullness of being which, finally, is incarnated in Trump himself. It follows that everything that may undermine this symbolic fullness, according to Trump, such as incursions by Mexicans or immigrants generally, has to be removed or severely curtailed. Needless to point out, his ardent followers buy into this because, as the

metonymic representative of the projected symbolic order they feel part of—that of ‘America will be great again!’—Trump is the one they identify with, no matter if what he represents is the stuff of fantasy. It is not so much that they desire to *be* Trump, but to be what he stands for, or is the model of, namely the ‘phallus’ of plenitude, as adumbrated by the ‘haves’ in *The Apprentice*. It is no accident that one of Naomi Klein's sub-headings in the chapter where she discusses the reasons for Trump's success with *The Apprentice* reads: ‘In a real-world nightmare, dreams sell’.

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