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Our 'Prophet of Deceit'

WWII-era social scientists explained Trump's appeal

By Richard Wolin October 30, 2016

To date, much ink has spilled attempting to historically situate Donald Trump's unprecedented and disturbing run for the American presidency. Of course, one of the problems in trying to do so is that, as a political outsider, Trump is a consummate shape-shifter. His positions can and do change from day to day, moment to moment.

By the same token, this rather basic and unarguable fact already reveals something significant about his candidacy. Whereas such glaring inconsistencies would have undoubtedly torpedoed a conventional candidate, remarkably, for more than a year, they left Trump more or less politically unscathed. Trump himself quipped in January: "I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody. And I wouldn't lose any voters, OK?" Time and again, Trump's bluster and outsize personality trump (*pardonnez-moi*) the customary considerations of rational accountability.

His loyal supporters seem to be, for the most part, indifferent to what Trump says: whether or not it is practicable (a wall to stanch immigration from Mexico), or constitutional (his proposal of a religious test to rebuff Muslims seeking to enter the United States). Instead, their devotion is largely predicated on Trump's personality and charisma. And on these grounds, they seem consistently willing to engage in a worrisome suspension of disbelief, waiving the evidentiary claims that voters traditionally rely on to evaluate a candidate's trustworthiness and viability.

Many commentators have also pondered whether Trump might be accurately described as a fascist. As a political formation, fascism was peculiar to interwar Europe. And while other political movements have sought to emulate fascism — for example, the Baathist regimes in Iraq and Syria — in an American context, the term is fated to confuse matters rather than to clarify them. Trump's backers are zealous in their support, but they bear little resemblance to the bellicose "shirt" movements — "black" and "brown" — whose street-fighting antics helped elevate Mussolini and Hitler to power during the 1920s and 1930s. As the historian Robert O. Paxton has pointed out, whereas the fascist potentates sought to suppress individualism, which they viewed as conducive to social anarchy and political weakness, in characteristic American fashion Trump and his supporters "have celebrated individualism to the absolute total extreme."

One would be closer to the mark in seeking to compare Trump's autocratic habits with authoritarian national populists like France's Marine Le Pen, Hungary's Viktor

Orbán, and Poland's Jaroslaw Kaczynski — figures who have sought to undermine Europe's ever-fragile, postwar democratic political consensus. To rethink Trump's standing along these lines also helps make sense of his disturbing admiration for one of the contemporary world's leading political tyrants, Russia's Vladimir Putin.

Do these interpretive challenges leave us without a reliable historical index to gauge the significance of Trump's candidacy? Not at all. It merely means that we must carefully calibrate our efforts in the search for an appropriate paradigm to shed light on the meaning of Trumpism and what it says about the fate of American democracy.

I would propose as a starting point a series of texts that were conceived by the Frankfurt School thinkers during the waning years of their American exile: five studies that were commissioned during the mid-1940s by the American Jewish Committee and that appeared under the rubric of *Studies in Prejudice*.

The best known of these was *The Authoritarian Personality*, a pathbreaking collaborative research project that was conducted by the social scientists Theodor W. Adorno, Else Frenkel-Brunswik, Daniel Levinson, and Nevitt Sanford.

The Authoritarian Personality was one of the first studies that strove to combine American and European approaches to social research. At the time, whereas American social scientists excelled at quantitative methods, Europeans, like Adorno and his Frankfurt School confreres, were more comfortable assessing the qualitative or interpretive stakes of a given set of data.

Among *The Authoritarian Personality*'s notable innovations was its development of the F Scale, where F = fascist. It was intended as an empirical index to assess the interviewees' latent authoritarian dispositions. For example, in order to ferret out their subjects' attitudes with respect to anti-Semitism — the ideological pivot of Nazism — researchers posed questions such as:

- "Can you tell a Jew from other people? How?"
- "Is it true that Jews have an undue influence in movies, radio, literature, and universities?"
- "If yes — what is particularly bad about it? What should be done about it?"
- "What did the Nazis do to the German Jews? What do you think about it? Is there such a problem here?"

One indication of the work's powerful impact was a 1973 report attesting that, between 1950 and 1957, no fewer than 101 sociological studies had utilized *The Authoritarian Personality* as their model.

Before proceeding further, it is worth pausing for a moment to review the political concerns that underlay the *Studies in Prejudice* series.

One of the major incentives to undertake the project had been the escalating persecution of European Jewry during the 1930s. However, it was the initial revelations about the Holocaust, dating from 1942, that lent the idea a special urgency. The Institute for Social Research — the New York-based institutional arm of the Frankfurt School — was well placed to undertake a major interdisciplinary investigation along these lines, since, in 1936, it had taken a step in this direction with the publication of *Studies on Authority and the Family*, edited by the Institute's director, the philosopher and sociologist Max Horkheimer.

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By the mid-1940s it had become clear that the Nazis would lose the war, but the question that increasingly preoccupied politicians and scholars at the time was, Could it happen here? Was the fiber of American democracy sound enough to resist what the French writer Jean-François Revel called "totalitarian temptations"? Wherein, precisely, lay the fault lines, and how might one best measure the risks? Finally, assuming that empirical inquiries could successfully identify widespread antidemocratic sentiment, what practical steps might be taken to redress these attitudes and shore up the civic allegiances and "habits of the heart" (De Tocqueville) in lieu of which democracy degenerates into the Moloch of autocracy?

One of the reasons that *Studies in Prejudice* was successful is that it refused to shy away from the complex demands of its subject matter. At issue was an intricate, multidimensional nexus requiring researchers to fathom the fraught confluence of political ideology, socioeconomic trends, and personality structure. By the same token, the basic goals of the project were relatively straightforward: to determine the prevalence and extent of authoritarian predispositions among the general public; and to discern the personality traits that rendered some people susceptible to the blandishments of authoritarian rule when others remained seemingly immune.

One of the reasons that *Studies in Prejudice* has retained its diagnostic value is that, early on, researchers realized that anti-Semitic views were indicative of a more generalized xenophobic orientation and disposition. In nearly every case, those who manifested an irrational hatred of Jews harbored similar resentments against other minorities and ethnic groups. As Adorno observed in *The Authoritarian Personality*: "Evidence from the present study confirms what has often been indicated: that a man who is hostile toward one minority group is very likely to be hostile against a wide variety of others." In other words, the subjects that Adorno and his colleagues interrogated were what one might call equal-opportunity discriminators.

Here, the obvious parallels with Trump's disparagement of a broad array of socially vulnerable outgroups leap to mind. Thus whereas the Republican presidential nominee has callously threatened to deport some 11 million immigrants and to promulgate a general ban on Muslims seeking to enter the United States, the "authoritarian personalities" that Adorno and colleagues scrutinized similarly avowed that they would "put aliens into concentration camps" or "expatriate Zionists."

Studies in Prejudice has also remained relevant because the researchers found that prejudice correlates positively with a mistrust of democratic institutions — a fact that also helps to explain why those with authoritarian proclivities are especially susceptible to conspiracy theories and to claims that the system is rigged. Since the 2016 presidential campaign began, it is clear that Trump's primary constituency, undereducated white males, perceive him as a political savior who can circumvent the rigged system, Congress, and the judiciary to deliver results unobtainable through normal institutional channels. As David Boaz, of the Cato Institute, wrote in the *National Review* last February: "He's the guy ... on a white horse ... who can ride into Washington ... and fix everything. He doesn't talk about policy or working with Congress. He's effectively vowing to be an American Mussolini, concentrating power in the Trump White House and governing by fiat."

However, at least as germane for understanding the mass psychological allure of Trumpism is the Critical Theorists' decryption of the predominant rhetorical techniques employed by America's homegrown protofascist agitators. In this case, too, the parallels and correspondences with Trump's oratorical bombast are revealing.

Both then and now, one of the professional agitator's central goals has been to infantilize his followers. By doing so, he accomplishes a twofold end: He turns them into pliable material for his own demagogic aims and simultaneously induces them to act against their real material interests. To achieve this, the demagogue meretriciously seizes on pressing and legitimate social problems — unemployment, social inequality, the aloofness and unconcern of professional politicians — to mystify their real source and to exaggerate their extent. By depicting the current situation in the blackest of all possible terms, the agitator heightens the despair of his listeners to the point where they are putty in his hands.

The demagogue's recourse to oratorical hyperbole and hyper-emotionalism proves to be an effective means of sowing confusion and disorientation in the mind of the average, downtrodden citizen, binding him or her more effectively to the demagogue as political Messiah. As Horkheimer observed in his introduction to the Studies in Prejudice series: "The demagogue sets the pattern for that most contemporary phenomenon, the deindividualized, incoherent, and fully malleable personality structure into which antidemocratic forces seek to transform man."

In *Prophets of Deceit* (1949), their analysis of the American agitator's stock-in-trade rhetorical tactics and ploys, the sociologist Leo Löwenthal and the scholar and translator Norbert Guterman cite the following characteristic remarks by one of the aspiring Führers they had been tracking:

When will the plain, ordinary, sincere, sheeplike people of America awaken to the fact that their common affairs are being run for them by aliens, Communists, crackpots, refugees, renegades, Socialists, termites, and traitors? These alien enemies of America are like the parasitic insect which lays his egg inside the cocoon of a butterfly, devours the larvae, and, when the cocoon opens, instead of the butterfly we find a pest, a parasite.

Here, a hypercharged, Armageddon-like lexicon of demonization, pestilence, and perdition forestalls a realistic assessment of social problems. An "enemies list" substitutes for a reasoned consideration of policy alternatives, thereby rendering further discussion superfluous. As Löwenthal and Guterman observe, instead of helping his followers to constructively sublimate their rage, "the agitator gives them permission to indulge in anticipatory fantasies in which they violently discharge those emotions against alleged enemies."

With "Trumpism," the list of culprits may have changed, but the oratorical invective remains familiar. Thus instead of a measured evaluation of policy alternatives or weighing the pros and cons of specific institutional reforms, Trump prefers to demonize his opponents — "crooked Hilary," "lying Ted" — thereby inviting his supporters to participate in campaign antics that, at times, resemble a provocatively choreographed, sadistic ritual. By inciting his devotees to a crescendo of ethnic and religious hatred, the demagogue ensures that their perception of reality remains distorted and that the cathexis or libidinal bond between him and his followers remains keen.

In truth, there is very little that is new or original about Trump's tagline that he alone can "make America great again," or, for that matter, his acceptance-speech declaration that "I will be your voice." Löwenthal and Guterman appositely cite an agitator from the 1940s who anticipates Trump's rhetorical histrionics with uncanny prescience: "I say what you all want to say and haven't got the guts to say. ... We propose without further ado ... to emasculate the debauchers within the social body and reestablish America on the basis where this spoliation can never again be repeated."

At other points, Trump has invoked for political gain the slogan "Take America Back." But that declaration isn't particularly novel either as the following quotation from *Prophets of Deceit* shows: "We are going to take this government out of the hands of these City slickers and give it back to the people that still believe that two and two is four. ... " Already in the 1940s, home-grown demagogues were adept at distinguishing between devious urban elites and so-called real Americans.

An authoritarian disposition was, by far, the single most important variable indicating support for Trump's candidacy.

Here, of course, the irony is that Trump, the scion of a New York real-estate mogul who boasts of a personal fortune worth \$10 billion (while repeatedly refusing to furnish his tax returns to prove it), can hardly be adjudged a "man of the people." Have "real Americans" run out of options to the point where they feel compelled to entrust their political fate to someone who is a proven bully, xenophobe, and misogynist? Someone who consistently allows ad hominem insults to substitute for political argument, and who, when he is trailing in the polls, obliquely threatens his opponent with violence, as his August [pod](#) to the "Second Amendment people" suggests?

In *Prophets of Deceit*, Löwenthal and Guterman seek to shed light on the social-psychological nature of prejudice by using the analogy of a persistently overcrowded bus. The frustrated passengers, their patience wearing thin, take to shouting out their own

solutions. Passenger A perceives the dilemma in down-to-earth, practical terms, sensibly proposing that the transportation company increase the number of buses on the overburdened line. Passenger B, conversely, pursues a very different tack — for the sake of argument, I will refer to it as the "Trump approach" — claiming histrionically that the overcrowding has nothing to do with the bus company's ineptitude. Instead, he alleges that America's failed immigration policies are at fault, singling out for blame, in the words of one participant quoted in the book, "all those foreigners who don't even speak good English [and who] should be sent back to where they came from."

For theoretical guidance, Adorno relied on Freud's 1922 study *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. At the dawn of the fascist era, Freud had perceptively analyzed the ontogenetic perils of "mass society" in terms of the risks of "ego regression": the sacrifice of individual autonomy on the altar of the irrational and emotional demands of the "group" as repository of the collective superego. The precarious nature of the transition from *Gemeinschaft*, community, to *Gesellschaft*, society, which entailed an accelerated and far-reaching dissolution of traditional social ties, caused such risks to escalate exponentially.

To illustrate the temptations of regression, Freud invoked the parable of the primal horde, whose group cohesion is cemented by an original act of violence: the putative slaying of the primal father. Because the maintenance of ego autonomy demands inordinate libidinal restraint, it is often perceived as burdensome. Hence, as the social psychologist Eric Fromm showed in his classic study *Escape From Freedom*, among "other-directed" — social and approval-seeking — personality types, such pressures and demands may often spur the individual to seek relief by partaking of the false consolations offered by the political demagogue, who doubles as an ersatz father figure. Especially in times of acute social and economic stress, the temptations of regression to a more primitive phylogenetic stage, as suggested by Freud's primal horde, often prove difficult to resist. (In the case of Trump's candidacy, undoubtedly, the after-effects of the 2008 financial crisis acted as an important catalyst.)

Viewed, then, through the prism of Freud's theory of mental topography, fascist character structure was marked by a weak ego, an overdeveloped superego, and an undisciplined id. The precarious fascist self was bolstered by the adherence to stereotypes and outwardly directed prejudice. The F-scale showed that fascist personality types perceived reason and democracy as manifestations of weakness, and therefore as suitable targets of instinctual aggression. Insofar as such types readily identified with the reigning powers, they were the ultimate political conformists. That was one of the Italian director Bernardo Bertolucci's central points in his groundbreaking 1970 political film, *The Conformist*.

Thus in Adorno's view, Freud's approach to the problems of group psychology offered an invaluable heuristic for understanding the relationship between socioeconomic crisis, narcissistic trauma (e.g., unemployment and the corresponding loss of social standing), and the emergence of regressive political movements — movements that seek compensatory solace in emotionalism and scapegoating as opposed to the more laborious and mature, ego-centered approaches to political problem-solving.

The F-scale as conceived by Adorno and his colleagues was far from uncontroversial. While acknowledging its commendable prognosticative value, critics felt that the researchers had skewed the questions in order to obtain the responses they desired.

Recently, political scientists have attempted to refine the methodological approach of the original Adorno research team, concluding that the subjects' attitudes toward child-rearing strategies and practices are a more accurate gauge of authoritarian proclivities. This strategy was effectively employed in the 2009 study by Marc J. Hetherington and Jonathan D. Weiler, *Authoritarianism and Polarization in American Politics* (Cambridge University Press) — a work that, in retrospect, is extremely helpful in explaining the attractions of Trump's campaign to a broad swath of the American electorate.

As one might expect, recently, studies on Trump and political authoritarianism have become something of an academic cottage industry. Key to them have been those kind of refined social-psychological measurement techniques. And the recent conclusions resoundingly reaffirm the findings of Adorno and his co-authors.

Matthew C. MacWilliams, of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, has been one of the leading analysts of authoritarian personality traits as a defining characteristic of Trump's supporters. In words that might well have been written by Adorno and colleagues, in a [recent article](#) MacWilliams felicitously described today's authoritarian personalities this way:

Individuals with a disposition to authoritarianism demonstrate a fear of "the other" as well as a readiness to follow and obey strong leaders. They tend to see the world in black-and-white terms. They are by definition attitudinally inflexible and rigid. And once they have identified friend from foe, they hold tight to their conclusions.

MacWilliams's characterization is very helpful in explaining why Trump's supporters, once they make up their minds, remain immovable: entirely impervious to countervailing facts, indices, and arguments.

During the 2016 primary campaign, MacWilliams meticulously interviewed a representative sample of 1,800 Trump supporters and arrived at a sobering conclusion: An authoritarian disposition was, by far, the single most important variable indicating support for Trump's candidacy — more important than income, educational level, and race. MacWilliams found that they were much more likely to believe that minority groups 1. should know their place; 2. should be prevented from opposing majority decisions; and that, 3. when the well-being of the country is at stake, the president should have the capacity to suppress the cacophony of opposing voices. They also felt strongly that mosques should be closed down and the writ of habeas corpus suspended in the case of citizens who are suspected of belonging to a terrorist organization.

Although Donald Trump may go away following the November election, Trumpism — the social causes that precipitated the Trump phenomenon — is unlikely to vanish anytime soon. The only way to remedy the worrisome authoritarian lurch in American

politics is to address in earnest its root causes. That means taking seriously the predicament of millions of American citizens who feel that the current political system, and the elites who run it, have consistently ignored their plight.

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