



Authoritarianism and the Cultic Dynamic: Traumatic Narcissism in American Politics Today

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I spent thirteen years of my life, including all of my thirties, as a fervent devotee of an Indian guru. I lived communally and worked full-time in the guru's organization, until one day, after a long process I now know was me slowly coming out of dissociation, it dawned on me like a thunderbolt: I was in a cult, a community that was led by an authoritarian dictator-like figure who presented herself as a living saint. I had experienced her charismatic power on first meeting her through a series of intense, mystical meditation experiences, and I got hooked. Clinging to the magic of those early, uncanny experiences, I submitted to years of abusive control, all in the name of loyalty, devotion, and striving for purification and enlightenment. The spell broke just as I was beginning my graduate degree in social work, with the aim of becoming a psychotherapist.

I emerged out of this cult into the world of Reaganomics, the Moral Majority, neoliberalism, Kenneth Starr and Monica Lewinsky. I heard ideologues like Newt Gingrich and Grover Norquist manipulating policy language so as to mask the underlying cruelty, racism, misogyny, greed and self-dealing that was hiding behind the rhetoric. This was precisely what I had recognized in the religious cult I had just left—an agenda of domination with a demand for submission, disguised, like a honey trap, as a ladder toward self-improvement and empowerment. The moral superiority these religious and political leaders cloaked themselves in thinly concealed their brutal, racist contempt for the underprivileged. For example, the so-called “welfare reform” movement was really a punish the poor movement. Then there was the rebranding of programs like Medicare and social security as undeserved “entitlements,” and contempt for and fear of women was recast as the “pro-life movement.” In his book *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism* (1961), psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton identified a universally present aspect of cultic communities with his phrase “loading the language.” “This jargon consists of [thought-terminating clichés](#), which serve to alter members' thought processes to conform to the group's way of thinking.” An excellent example of “loading the language,” fostered for decades by think-tanks funded by oligarchs like the Koch Brothers, is use of the term “entitlements.” Linguist George Lakoff (2011) pointed out that these New Deal and Great Society programs, such as Social Security and Medicare, are in fact *protections* not entitlements, against the scourges of old-age poverty and medical bankruptcy. The majority of the public and the media, however, and not just on the right, are now used to the term entitlements, because they have been brainwashed by a very efficient right-wing propaganda machine into accepting it. It frightened me then, fresh

out of a cult, and it frightens me now more than ever, that so many Americans are so successfully being manipulated and deceived by their media idols, their religious leaders, and by the people for whom they are voting. And behind all this ideology that has stoked working-class resentment of so-called elites, is a group of billionaire oligarchs funding think tanks, meticulously dictating talking points, and buying every academic and politician they can get into their pockets.

I have watched with dread as these ideologues moved their paranoid agendas, full of disavowed fear and hatred, right into the center of public discourse. Instead of all this being rejected by the larger public, the way Joe McCarthy or Nixon were eventually, and in spite of, and in many ways in reaction to the intelligence and dignity Barack Obama represented, we now have Donald Trump. We have a Republican Party in power that is fully complicit in allowing him to systematically chip away at and undermine all the safeguarding functions of our democracy. We have a corporate-owned media, and not just Fox, that has been increasingly forced by market pressure to give voice to the right-wing agenda, with all its Orwellian doublespeak and pseudo-intellectual rationalizations.

One of the particular horrors for me has been the re-emergence in power circles of “objectivism,” the philosophical system created by the potboiler novelist Ayn Rand. “My philosophy,” she wrote, “is the concept of man as a heroic being, with his own happiness as the moral purpose of his life, with productive achievement as his noblest activity, and reason as his only absolute.” According to the website for The Atlas Society, an organization which promotes the thinking of Rand, [Objectivism](#) is her philosophy of rational individualism. In novels such as [The Fountainhead](#) and [Atlas Shrugged](#), “Rand dramatized her ideal man, the producer who lives by his own effort and does not give or receive the undeserved, who honors achievement and rejects envy” ([The Atlas Society website](#)).

The disavowal of envy means that envy is projected onto those the supermen deem undeserving and worthy of contempt. Disavowing envy in themselves, they attribute it to and elicit it in those upon whom they look down on and seek to keep down. Certainly, during my time spent in a religious cult, while slaving for a guru whose corruption I denied and dissociated, my innate idealism was grossly misplaced, and complicated by much about myself I did not yet understand. But now, it is not as a starry-eyed idealist that I abhor the idolization of pure selfishness, and the contempt for vulnerability, enshrined as sacred by the followers of Rand. One such follower is House Speaker Paul Ryan, the leader of what is currently the most anti-Democratic government branch in the USA other than the Executive. This kind of selfishness is cruelty; it is the definition of what we mean by inhumane. The superiority and entitlement of those adopting this kind of ideology is nihilism—Thanatos (death), not Eros (love); narcissism, not intersubjectivity. Narcissus, you will remember, died of self-adoration. And the one who adored him, Echo, ceased to be anything but that—not a whole human being, just a disembodied echo. And that right there is the story of every cult in a nutshell. A leader believes themselves to be superior, perfect and infinitely entitled; they become more and more paranoid, more and more manic, until they bring about their own destruction; those who follow lose their innate moral compass, they lose contact with truth, they live in a world of “alternative facts.” In the case of today’s G.O.P. and this president, multiple paths to hellbent destruction are being pursued: economically, ecologically, socially, morally.

There are a variety of ways that those who reject Trumpism are reacting. By Trumpism I mean to identify the main enablers of Trump, including the Ayn Randers, the neo-Nazis, white supremacists, the religious right, the oil lobby, the gun lobby, the billionaire oligarch community, the Goebbels-inspired media, and of course Putin's Russia. Less obvious sources of support are the corporate and financial players, who gladly accept whatever temporary benefits come their way, like the G.O.P. tax bill, even if they don't adore Trump in the same way his followers do. For me, and for many in my practice who have previously known the unfreedom of being in a subjugating relational system with a traumatizing narcissist, there is a feeling of helplessness. We may have achieved a degree of liberation from the original traumatizing significant other(s) of our histories but is there going to be an escape from Trump? Or from billionaire Murdoch and the de facto state news outlet, Fox News? Or the billions of dollars the Kochs and the Mercers and Adelson are ready to spend on their purely self-serving, oligarchical agendas (Mayer, 2016)?

My impetus to develop a theory about the relational system of the traumatizing narcissist (Shaw, 2014) stemmed initially from my own need to make sense of the guru I had idolized, and why she sought to seduce and then sadistically control people. My interest developed further as I encountered in my practice more and more people who had not been in a cultic group, but who had nevertheless been or were in relationships that very closely reflected the dynamics of cults. Working for more than twenty years now with survivors of narcissistic abuse, most of whom were abused in relationships, personal and/or professional, and not in cults, I have seen how healing it is to help a patient pull aside the curtain that their personal Wizard of Oz hid behind, and expose how dissociated and disconnected from reality their traumatizer really was. This aspect of working with patients who have been relationally traumatized and the restoration of their faith in themselves through the unpacking of the traumatizer's psychology to reveal that the Emperor is naked, is not a replacement for the work of self-understanding that we all aspire to facilitate. Rather, it can be a component of relational trauma work that helps makes sense of what happened by making sense of what the traumatizer was doing, how they did it and why they did it. Many of those whom I have worked with had seen many other therapists before anyone explained to them to try to think about and understand their abuser's behavior. All too often, they had been led to "forgiveness," which results in more, not less, dissociation.

But let's not kid ourselves: by psychologically profiling Trump, I am not offering the kind of relief that some trauma survivors experience when they come to understand how they became subjugated to a significant other. Erich Fromm's way of understanding Hitler and his followers, in his book *Escape From Freedom* (1941), taught us a lot about authoritarianism, but an educated public is not what stopped Hitler—he was stopped because the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. It remains to be seen whether Trump and his agenda—and I define his agenda as whatever it takes to continually assure Trump that his delusion of omnipotence is not a delusion—will be stopped any time soon, the Dick Tracy doggedness of Robert Mueller notwithstanding.

This formulation of the traumatizing narcissist's relational system, which views such a person as driven by their need to assure themselves of their own omnipotence, is based on observations of my ex-guru and some others I have known personally, along with some of my most severely traumatized patients' observations of their traumatizers. My ideas are also

influenced by the work Fromm did on narcissism, particularly what he termed malignant narcissism:

The sadistic person *needs* his object just as much as the masochistic *needs* his. Only instead of seeking security by *being swallowed*, he gains it *by swallowing somebody else* ... In one case I dissolve myself in an outside power; I lose myself. In the other case I enlarge myself by making another being part of myself and thereby I gain the strength I lack as an independent self. (Fromm, *Escape From Freedom*, 1941; italics mine.)

The extreme narcissist's life purpose becomes to sustain his delusion of omnipotence; he must prove his superiority, over and over again. Because this delusion is an attempt to deny extreme traumatic brokenness, it is fragile. It is papering over underlying psychosis.

Fromm states that "Psychosis is a state of absolute narcissism, one in which the person has broken all connection with reality outside, and has made his own person the substitute for reality. He is entirely filled with himself, he has become 'god and the world' to himself." According to Fromm (1964, p. 76), his strategy for sustaining the delusion is to get,

the consensus of [at least] one other person, and, if possible, ... [to] obtain ... the consensus of millions. The former case is that of a *folie à deux* (some marriages and friendships rest on this basis), while the latter is that of public figures who prevent the open outbreak of their potential psychosis by gaining the acclaim and consensus of millions of people. The best-known example for this latter case is Hitler. Here was an extremely narcissistic person who probably could have suffered a manifest psychosis had he not succeeded in making millions believe in his own self-image ... (After he had failed he had to kill himself, since otherwise the collapse of his narcissistic image would have been truly unbearable) ... From Caligula and Nero to Stalin and Hitler we see that their need to find believers, to transform reality so that it fits their narcissism, and to destroy all critics, is so intense and so desperate precisely because it is an attempt to prevent the outbreak of [their own] insanity. Paradoxically, the element of insanity in such leaders makes them also successful. It gives them that certainty and freedom from doubt which is so impressive to the average person.

On the spectrum of narcissism, figures like Trump start at traumatizing and go straight to malignant.

In the following I summarize my understanding of how a person becomes this kind of traumatizing narcissist from a developmental perspective. I look at how the traumatizing narcissist parent impacts his or her children, in some cases, leading the child to develop into a newer model of the parent, and in others, the development of post-traumatic self-negation.

- 1) **Intergenerational Trauma.** The traumatizing narcissist has typically been exposed to cumulative relational trauma throughout the developmental years, in the form of chronic shaming at the hands of parents and/or other significant caregivers who are severely narcissistically disturbed. The traumatizing narcissist envies and resents the child's right to dependency, and demands, covertly or overtly, that the child recognize

the exclusive validity of the parent's needs and wishes—which means of course that the child is to be ashamed of her own needs and desires and view them as the parent does—as irrelevant, or as contemptible; i.e., greedy, selfish, weak, morally abhorrent. This parent assumes the posture of viewing dependency in others as contemptible, delusionally imagining themselves to have transcended dependency. The traumatized child, who has been successfully indoctrinated to view dependency as shamefully contemptible, and who as an adult has renounced (but actually disavowed) dependency, and erected rigid, manic defenses against shame, can now become the traumatizing narcissist.

2) **Delusional Infallibility and Entitlement.** The adult traumatizing narcissist is obsessed with maintaining a rigid sense of omnipotent superiority and perfection—of infallibility, self-sufficiency and entitlement. They defend their conviction of righteousness and justification vigilantly. The psychotic nature of this delusion of righteousness should not be overlooked or minimized: the traumatizing narcissist is often intelligent, socially adept and highly functioning, convinced of their own sanity and skilled at making others feel crazy. They have to keep themselves hyper-inflated; the relational way they do this is to view others who do not recognize their superiority as inferior. For the traumatizing narcissist, maintaining a sense of omnipotent superiority—delusionally believing that one needs nothing that one cannot provide for oneself—defends against disavowed insufficiency of any and all varieties. Since, for the traumatizing narcissist, insufficiency is equated with mortifying dependency and the ensuing sense of impotence and inferiority, it is crucial to keep the destabilizing shame of these repudiated aspects of self from being released into consciousness.

3) **Externalization of Shame.** Rather than feel self-loathing and the helplessness of unrequited dependency needs, the traumatizing narcissist arranges for dependency and its accompanying shame to be kept external, assigned to belong only to others, so as to protect themselves from self-loathing and ultimately from decompensation—literally, mortification, or (psychic) death by shame.¹ Contemptible, shameful dependency/weakness/badness must be continually demonstrated to be “out there,” not “in here.” Bach (1994) has observed this as well, stating that “the overinflated narcissist can experience himself as cohesive and alive only at the expense of devitalizing his objects” (p. 32). To achieve this goal of “devitalization,” the traumatizing narcissist virtually colonizes others, using the other as a host, as it were, in whom to project and control his unwanted and disavowed affects and self-states connected to dependency—especially the shameful sense of neediness and inferiority.

¹ For a fascinating depiction of the fate of this character type at its most extreme, see Robert Jay Lifton's (2000) account of the Japanese guru, Shoko Asahara, who led his follower group of accomplished professionals in the science fields to release sarin gas in the Tokyo subway system. Forced to appear in court and stand accused, Asahara quickly decompensated to florid schizophrenia.

4) **Suppression of the subjectivity of the other.** The traumatizing narcissist's child is, unfortunately, an optimal target for the reception of these projections, especially the projection of shame regarding dependency. The traumatizing narcissist parent sees only their own needs as valid—and characterizes the child who tries to express their needs as needy, selfish and dependent. At the same time, the traumatizing narcissist parent cannot bear the possibility of being surpassed and not needed by the child, and so must undermine the child's efforts toward independence. This is of course a perfect double bind (Bateson et al., 1956). Unable to be anything but dependent, yet still attempting independence, the child of the traumatizing narcissist parent is condemned either way. The child comes to associate dependency with shame and humiliation, and independence with rejection and abandonment. Unless they can adopt the counterdependent, shameless stance of the traumatizing narcissist, they live instead in a post-traumatic state in which their sense of inescapable badness is cemented.

To put all this in the simplest possible terms: the developing child of the traumatizing narcissist takes one of two possible paths for survival in the face of the being raised by the traumatizing narcissist: 1) *externalization* of shameful dependency (the badness) through the subjugation of others; or 2) *internalization* of the badness the traumatizing narcissist parent has projected. In the first instance, the child becomes much like his traumatizer—the traumatizing narcissist. In the second, the child becomes the post-traumatic, objectified and self-objectifying person who is repeatedly in relationships in which he or she is subjugated by the other.

After many years of learning about so many different leaders of abusive cults from clients and colleagues, it is clear to me that their personalities are organized in remarkably similar ways, and their behaviors are uncannily similar as well. Trump flagrantly exhibits the following behaviors, all of which are the typical behaviors of cult leaders as repeatedly described to me and others who study this subject by those who have been their followers: he is infinitely entitled and grateful to no one; he rewrites history to create a biography that leaves out any trace of his significant misdeeds and failures; he never hesitates to lie for the purpose of self-aggrandizement or to blame others for his endless stream of errors and failures; he is chaos-generating, erratic, thin-skinned, belligerent, and constantly involved in attacking and belittling perceived enemies; he persuades followers to see their lives as wretched before convincing them to join his group, and he claims exclusive possession of the power to transform follower's lives in miraculous ways. All these behaviors are means toward the end of self-idolization, and eliciting the idolization of others to defend against the outbreak of unbearably toxic shame. For any traumatizing narcissist, at whatever degree of malignancy, defending against the outbreak of unbearable shame is always their *raison d'être*.

The traumatizing narcissist who operates at the level of power Trump has reached exhibits more and more extreme behaviors as the pressures of living up to their delusion of perfection mount, and as they inevitably become exposed to scrutiny and criticism. All too often, terrified and enraged by challenges to their fantasy of omnipotence, they lead their followers on to acts of violence, against others or even against themselves. The history of the

twentieth century, characterized by both extreme nationalistic narcissism that proclaims the exclusive validity of one nation and the right to deny life and freedom to members of another, and mass murders perpetrated by its dictators, is a horrific, tragic history that is still being written. To paraphrase the title of Sinclair Lewis's book: it can happen here. It is well underway.

Judith Herman and Robert J. Lifton, brilliant elucidators of trauma and totalitarianism, respectively, are among many notables in the field of psychiatry who have publicly spoken out about Trump's mental status (Lee, 2017). Mental health professionals weighing in on Trump may not have an immediate impact but malignant narcissists tend to implode sooner or later, and public humiliation usually speeds up the process. I both eagerly await the implosion and fear the form the implosion will take. I try not to flee, freeze or submit in this traumatizing environment; I try to fight. While it may seem a drop in the bucket, while history cruelly repeats itself in spite of our efforts not to forget, I believe that our use of psychoanalytic principles to understand what we are seeing is not in vain. As we wait for the tide to turn, we can fight at the political level as citizens; we can disseminate our theories and hope to make a difference. And meanwhile, those who work in psychotherapy can continue in their consulting rooms as passionately and as intelligently, and with as much hope and compassion, as possible. That's what I want to keep alive in myself, as a citizen and as a psychoanalyst.

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