

# Donald Trump as Leader: Psychoanalytic Perspectives

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## Abstract

Psychoanalysts who study the internal processes of group formation and functioning have a good deal to offer in understanding Donald Trump's powerful appeal to a segment of American voters. In this paper, we examine how this politician has ignited the fierce loyalty of a dedicated group of followers. We further use group analytic concepts to consider the ways in which his followers in turn exert their influence on Trump himself. Finally, referring to the literature on group leadership, we consider the inevitable impact of a leader whose communications often stray from logic and demonstrable fact and which seem to intentionally promote group regression and fantasy. This analysis pertains to the effect he has on those staunch supporters who say there is little he could do to shake their faith in him.

## KEYWORDS

group formation, group functioning, leadership

## 1 | DONALD TRUMP'S APPEAL TO HIS FOLLOWERS: PSYCHOANALYTIC BACKGROUND

Sigmund Freud (1921) wrote the first comprehensive analysis of leader–group dynamics, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, in which he observed the powerful ties forged among group members based on their identifications with their leader and, as a result, also with each other. In this context, aspects of individuals' ego and superego functioning might be surrendered to the leader and to the group itself. Aggression among group members tends to be projected outwards toward a common enemy in order to maintain solidarity within the group.

Wilfred Bion (1961) deepened this analysis by observing the powerful regressions that occur within groups when they are abandoned by their leader to define and execute their central tasks without his/her help. Bion noted three types of regression that occurred within such "leaderless groups". He subsequently observed that these regressions were universal features of group life, detected in inflamed forms under particular, aggravating circumstances. In the first type, a group effectively abandons its core work and begins instead to live out a fantasy about the urgent need

to *fight* or *flee* some oppressive or weakening force in order to maintain its identity, or even its existence. This is a *fight/flight regression*.

In the second type of regressive process, a previously functioning work group (that is, a group that has been focused and effective at its central task) is seen to engage in excessive *dependency* on its leader, abrogating decisions and actions to him/her, rather than working in such a manner that its individual members continue to make their own independent and original contributions, which may include constructive criticism of the group's ideas and process. This is a *dependency regression*. In the third, or *pairing regression*, group members are seen to overly identify with a couple, a family, or a common ideal that is expected to confer a magical specialness through association. Relations with such an ideal or personage carry a broadly erotic charge, expressed, for example, through fascination with his/her sexual life (such as the excessive interest in "Royal Weddings" or in Princess Diana's story).

Bion also addressed the power of projective identifications in group life, as he noted that the aggression directed outward from groups in order to maintain internal stability had a particular quality. Groups tend to project disowned aspects of themselves that nonetheless hold a certain fascination: they become quite emotionally involved with these projected aspects as they "discover" them in the outsiders.

Following Bion's work, Turquet (1975) studied larger unstructured groups of 40 or more members, describing regressive fantasies of merger with the other members in this context, as well as a bland, clichéd thinking that tends to usurp the group discourse. Turquet observed that these phenomena seem to defend against the intense aggression, usually envy, mobilized within members in such an unstructured setting. Kenneth Eisold (2010) describes the tendency toward both projective and simplistic thinking in large groups as follows: "Faced with too much complexity, we 'chunk' the bits together into wholes we can process, at the expense of precision or even accuracy. In groups, particularly larger groups, such 'chunking' means that we lump people together as we try to grasp the shifting complexities of group dynamics" (p. 61). This results in the anxious sense that individuals have of being "chucked" by others, of being misunderstood and subject to their projections.

Vamik Volkan (1997, 2013) studying the after-effects of trauma in large groups, has emphasized the need to understand a group's particular history in order to fully analyze what is being expressed in their particular regressions. Volkan has found that past group traumas that were never fully acknowledged, neither mourned nor worked through but instead mythologized, leave the group members and their descendants frozen in an ongoing denial of essential aspects of their experience. This dilemma can occur within large groups that are either the victims or the perpetrators of trauma. Volkan also writes evocatively about the cultural aspects of group life that provide a "second skin" for their individual members: those rituals or practices that convey warmth or belonging, the achievement of competence or identity. These may include, for ethnic or national groups, characteristic foods, songs, greetings. All groups, it seems to us, automatically create symbols and rituals of belonging in order to promote internal stability. These may become highly valued, and if they seem to be under attack, prompt highly emotional responses.

## 2 | TRUMP'S APPEAL TO HIS FOLLOWERS: ANALYSIS

Using these basic group-psychoanalytic observations, it is possible to analyze the sources of Donald Trump's appeal to his followers.

This president cultivates very specific kinds of identification, both conscious and otherwise. He repeatedly touts his business acumen and wealth, continually referring to his billions, his signature properties, to the Miss Universe Pageants that he ran, the golf clubs, resorts and casinos that he owns – and particularly to the negotiating skills which he publicized in his commissioned, ghost-written book, *The Art of the Deal* (Trump with Schwarz, 1987). Trump further developed this image through the reality television show, *The Apprentice* (Burnett & Trump, 2004–2016) that he co-produced, during which he portrayed himself as a savvy, consummate businessman, chauffeured through midtown Manhattan in an opulent stretch limo before ascending over the city in his personal helicopter. The program's premise

was that Mr Trump would evaluate prospective employees competing for a lucrative job as his apprentice, through which the winner would "learn from me and maybe become billionaires themselves (sic)" (*The Apprentice*, Introduction to Season 1). During this prologue, Trump stressed that the show's contestants came from all walks to life: from "Harvard's Master of Business Administration (MBA)" to "people who own small businesses". He further emphasized that all were individuals who wanted to test whether they had the smarts and the talent to "make it in New York City" as he had. Trump vaunted his toughness during these episodes: he was the powerful "decider", summarily dismissing the competitors who were not "tough enough" with his signature phrase, "You're fired!"

It is through this cultivated presentation that the politician–entrepreneur offers his followers an identification with power, decisiveness, wealth. In *The Apprentice*, Trump explicitly promises to share the secrets of his success with worthy followers regardless of their backgrounds,<sup>1</sup> while on the campaign trail, he offers this success as proof that he can "take charge", "cut through red tape", and "negotiate" deals for his constituents, so that together they will "Make America Great Again." It is of interest that Trump does not specifically discuss details of what is wrong with his nation, other than to say that it has "been weakened" by the bad deals of past Presidents. Nor has he ever specifically offered details about his actual net worth, about the value of his endeavors, or of the amount of taxes he has paid (or avoided paying). Avoiding factual information is a way of maintaining mystery, of cultivating an aura of almost magical power that can appeal to peoples' desire to trust, to hope, that this leader will use his power to their benefit and will allow them to share in it too, without having to worry about exactly what he has been up to. In other words, Trump employs *the strategic cultivation of a dependency regression* among his group of followers – stoking their craving for a strong leader who will solve their difficulties and allow them to share in his fantasized power. His followers are not ever invited to consult position papers, to look at sample budgets, or to themselves consider various solutions to thorny political or financial issues. Indeed, Trump the candidate scorned his opponents' focus on policy details as signifying a kind of inauthentic, distasteful "political speak". Instead, Trump stated baldly that "I alone can fix this": in other words, no one need think about solutions to the nation's difficulties other than him. In addition to invitations to share in his power or to benefit from his negotiating prowess, Donald Trump has a practice of explicitly appealing to his audience as a "We" – a "family" who share an almost unmediated bond with him. This can occur in the context of a playful enjoiner: "*We have a lot of fun here at these rallies, don't we?*" Some Trump voters stress this quality: they feel that he understands their situation, uniquely tells their truth, un-doctored: "without bullshit" (Altman, 2017). While himself wealthy, they feel that he, too is an outsider from "the elites". One supporter, for example, stood with Trump as someone who could understand his own, very difficult situation, as opposed to "the elites", who do not. "I'd love to see one-tenth of the outrage about the state of our lives out here that you have for Muslims from another country. You have no idea what our lives are like" (Altman, 2017). In speaking about his followers as a "We", Mr Trump and his base inevitably draw a "Them" by way of contrast.

As he refers to this "Them", Trump's playfulness quickly morphs into an invitation to a sly cruelty. First, the cruelty concerns his immediate rivals: "Do you *really* think that *low-energy Jeb Bush or Little Mario can deliver what they promise?*" (Stephenson, 2016). The entrepreneur's facial expressions of disbelief and disgust for his rivals serve as invitations to the crowd to "smarten up," to see what he perceives as the other candidates' flaws, to identify with his rapid-fire, "tough" assessments. The constant one-line put-downs are a performance for "his" crowds to demonstrate that what he has to offer is exactly what they wanted to hear: the tough, unvarnished, "no-nonsense" assessments of a "winner", decisively squelching all the other "losers".

This stance, in person, with a crowd fired up by their leader to bash "the elites", has the power to morph quickly into something increasingly ugly, threatening, even violent. Trump embeds an ugliness within myths that he is aware will appeal to his conservative followers, who tend to feel displaced in a rapidly changing social and economic environment. "You know", he would say at his campaign rallies "... these protestors have no respect. They would *never* have been allowed to do this back in the day. They would have been beaten up *so badly* they would never have dared to protest again!" Such utterances are designed to evoke a sense of Trump as the stern grandparent or father (Lakoff, 2008), punishing those others "who deserve it", while defending those in the crowd – "Us" – who respect "our" country. Trump makes a blatant appeal to the crowd to join with him as punitive – but fair adults, who enjoy "a bit

of fun giving *those* people what they deserve." The crowd, emboldened, join in an identification with the aggressor; they may also do this out of repressed fear of being left out, mocked, or punished themselves. In a sense, this dynamic is similar to that in an abusive family situation where a father sets his children against each other, and permits abuse by a dominant child.

This leader thus also encourages a Bionian "*fight*" group regression as well as a dynamic based on his power and the members' dependency. He portrays those who do not follow him as *enemies* who are *weakening the country, weakening its identity and its place in the world*. They must therefore be fought and censored. It is especially noteworthy that Trump takes a "fight-group regression" into this particular direction, one that evokes potential shame about "letting these people" take over, "letting them weaken us". Instead, the crowd is invited to defend themselves, to affirm their intact identity through a permissible sadism. The crowd should hurt and humiliate them, those others who would, by their very existence and presence, weaken and shame the group itself.

When Mr Trump states grandly that he will pay the legal bills of anyone who roughs up a protester, his words are direct appeals to the undercurrent of sadism *that can co-exist with, but is itself quite different from, an existing social anger* regarding accumulated social inequalities or injustices. The encouragement to sadism can result in what Freud originally observed as an abrogation of aspects of individuals' superego constraints, now delegated to the crowd and to the leader. Thus, people who might not usually join in bullying within their individual lives may feel freer to express – and even enjoy – their sadism in this socially encouraged context – especially if they feel "shamed into it". The relationship between the fear of weakness or identity threat, a reactive shame, and the desire to undo the shame through the pure enjoyment of sadism is exploited by this leader in a manner not often discussed in the psychoanalytic literature of groups and organizations.

Many psychoanalytic thinkers view sadistic thoughts, impulses and actions as largely defensive against dysphoric affect states in individuals, such as against humiliation, helplessness, fear or sadness. They tend to limit their analysis of sadism, then, to a phenomenon that is purely reactive and without primary pleasure. Leaving aside for the moment whether that is the whole truth of human experience, it is certainly clear that within the crowds at Trump rallies, his followers express considerable anger via their sadistic responses to certain named "enemies": Muslims, "bad hombre" Mexican drug dealers, "Black Lives Matter" protestors, and especially, toward his major rival, Hillary Clinton ("Lock her up!"). The fact that these emotions are so easily generated – and seem to be so fully embraced, a source of identity and pleasure – may be at least in part a reaction to a feeling of what the press has dubbed "insecurity or disenfranchisement" within the group. Vamik Volkan (2013) writes about such reactions as being particularly accessible for members of groups that have been humiliated or traumatized in the past, when their defeat or injury has not been truly accepted or mourned. Something similar may happen in groups which themselves have perpetrated genocide or enslavement, if their evil was never fully acknowledged and atoned for. The unconscious, persistent guilt is defended against via both projection and denial.

We know that the most extreme rage responses seen clinically are proportional to the most intolerable affective states – especially those of impotent helplessness or forced passivity. This can be seen in both individual and in large group responses. Anger, in reaction to either sadness, humiliation, or helplessness, causes an individual (or individuals within a group setting) to feel much stronger than the state it defends against. That is a psychoanalytic truism that bears repeating here. Anger makes one feel less injured or depleted, simply on the most basic level of mental energy, even apart from the question of what psychic representation might be attached to the hurt or injured feeling. Any unpleasant affect can generate defensive anger, but shame and humiliation hold a special place in this analysis, as does the traumatic experience of helplessness. Thus, Trump's ability to mobilize extremes of anger and sadism are based on his providing his followers with the antidote to feelings of shame and impotence. He is not ashamed of being even worse than most of his followers. He is openly dishonest, misogynistic, corrupt, old, unattractive, has orange hair and a double chin and he *does not care*. He reverses a lack of social status for his followers by being proudly and defiantly *not* born in to the upper middle class, not *really* educated (that is, his very speech suggests that he is hardly an educated elite), perhaps even disabled (dyslexic, disruptive, impulsive), and so he is *without any class* in the most elementary sense. Instead, he turns the usual shame response of hiding, fearing disclosure, embarrassment etc. into

a reason for pride, even superiority over those who feel shame at all. This is a classic manic defense, as described by Klein.

Trump also, in his completely unapologetic claim to power, provides an antidote to the social helplessness or perceived social inferiority experienced by some of his followers. Many seem to feel displaced by those who historically were considered “beneath” them – minorities, immigrants, etc. That kind of perceived humiliation seems to provoke especially violent reactions in the crowds at Trump rallies, dissolving the usual restraints of conscience. As a result one sees, for example, people wearing “Slavery is good” shirts, issuing death threats toward Hillary Clinton, and proclaiming gleefully but savagely, “Lock Her Up!”

This is also an anger that feels self-justifying, that condones retaliation. Trump says to his followers, both directly and indirectly, that something (stature, safety, respect) has been stolen from them; taking it back is thus felt as self-defense. Essentially, his message becomes: “You are simply protecting yourself – and to do this, of course, you also need your guns – and, of course – Hillary wants to take them away”. This message, in essence, is geared toward the glory of male aggression as a defense against phallic inadequacy and dependency. For the women at these rallies, there is likely a strong unconscious identification with that dynamic as well: they may imagine themselves armed with their own form of phallic aggression in the face of feeling envious, inadequate or defeated.

In addition to the “self-defensive” rage and vengefulness discussed earlier, one sees an increasingly erotic pitch to the sadism of the crowd: witness the tee shirts in “his” crowds emblazoned with “Trump that Bitch”, and “Deported: Right to my Bedroom” (Pro-Trump Tee-Shirts. Café Press.com) or “Grab MY pussy.” Sadism is pleasurable because it is intrinsically erotic as well as aggressive. In this sense, the explicit misogyny is pleasurable because it combines a sense of power, rage and erotic domination. For the women wearing “Grab MY pussy” shirts, the situation is a bit more complicated. In this context, there seems to be an undoing of a sense of helplessness by an identification with male aggression, a sense that one is not the object of the aggression as much as that one has chosen, sado-masochistically, to join in it. For the male followers, this is an element as well, in that they have chosen to identify with a dominant male, but also to subsume themselves to him.

In his call for a vengeful and exciting “self-defense”, Donald Trump also directly stirs racist feelings and beliefs, playing on centuries-old American narratives. Americans have historically felt both frightened and enraged by the protests and potential power of those non-Whites whom they have defeated or enslaved. For example, Louisa Adams, John Quincy Adams’ wife, while agreeing with her husband about the unfairness of slavery, noted in her diary that she was quite frightened of slaves’ retaliatory aggression, should they be set free (Thomas, 2016, pp 422–423). That fear of aggression – and the guilty, disowned awareness of the aggression it takes to subjugate another person – has remained alive over the generations in America, post-slavery. Also disowned over the generations, though re-enacted repeatedly during the Jim Crow era and beyond is the fact that (Gay, 2016) slave-owners must clearly have experienced pleasure in their ownership, as later generations have experienced pleasure in their dominance over the slaves’ consciously and unconsciously denigrated descendants. To have been deprived of this particular, prideful, evil pleasure, and of the economic benefits it brought through the defeat of the Confederacy, was experienced as a huge wound that has survived the last century and a half. Evidence that this wound persists, unresolved, is found in the frankly mythical history of the Confederacy propagated still in Southern states (Thompson, 2013) in the recent uproar over the removal of Confederate monuments and flags from prominent locations in Southern states, and in the fact that nearly half of White Southerners currently feel under attack (Thomsen, 2017). Vamik Volkan (1997) has written extensively about this in his analytic studies of cultures in which defeat and humiliation are re-written, denied, un-mourned. This happens as well in cultures that have perpetrated violence, in which the violence is simultaneously denied *and* blamed on the victim.

In addition to playing to particular historical wounds, humiliations, denied evils and prejudices shared by parts of the populace, Trump appeals to certain fantasies that commonly emerge in cultural groups fearing an imminent collapse in their welfare or identity. These fantasies concern the magical wish for “purity” as opposed to the “contamination” by the blood of outsiders. Bohleber (2010) describes how Hitler used this fantasy – which he shared – to manipulate German fears against Jewish citizens. White supremacists, whose allegiance Trump has openly courted, articulate this idea quite clearly.

Finally, as Hitler also did, Trump has become adept at projecting his followers' sense of disenfranchisement and need onto those Others who may need "entitlements": those who may use provisions of the social safety net. Illegal immigrants, most of whom pay taxes and contribute their labor to this country, are maligned essentially as greedy, rapacious invaders. The American poor are depicted as lazy, slovenly, unwilling to help themselves, and essentially as greedy, entitled and ungrateful mouths to feed.

So far, in sum, we have seen Donald Trump's strong appeal to a group of followers as based on: (1) identification with his power, wealth and success, which are suggested and proclaimed rather magically; (2) identification with him as the leader who uniquely understands, accepts, and offers himself as the one who is "like them", a part of their merged "us"; (3) acceptance of an encouraged dependency: he will use his savvy and phallic toughness to solve the problems of the group: they need do nothing but follow and support him; (4) acceptance of the need to fight shared enemies – those who "weaken us"; (5) identification with him as the "fair but tough" parent, which is essentially an identification with an aggressor; (6) identification with Trump's "shamelessness" as a manic defense against powerlessness and injury; (7) enjoyment of a shared anger, which is pleasurable and feels strengthening, of a jointly-condoned sadism, and of the loosening of superego constraints; (8) a stirring of racial grievances and fantasies of group purity against the terror of a loss of group identity and existence; (9) a joining with myths woven in the former Confederate states that disown and obfuscate the painful group history of greed and sadism, humiliation and defeat; (10) a projection of the group's greed onto the Other.

The fact that Donald Trump has affected his followers in the direction of shared resentment, racial grievance and projection of hatred on the Other has been established by research demonstrating the dramatic increase in hate crimes and bias incidents that have occurred since late in 2016, and in racial jeering that invokes Trump's name (Barry & Eligon, 2017).

### 3 | RECIPROCAL IMPACT OF REGRESSIONS ON GROUP AND LEADER

The sadistic enjoyment, sense of rightful rage, and imperative for "self-defense" and vengeance shared by Donald Trump and his followers has contributed to actual violence at his rallies. An example of this can be viewed in the videotape from a rally in Louisville Kentucky on March 1, 2016 during the presidential campaign (Biskupic, 2017). During this campaign rally, Trump notices three peaceful protestors, present to witness the event, and attributes to them, personally, blame for his "fact" that "WE (Americans) are going down FAST". He repeats this several times, then intones, "GET 'EM OUT OF HERE. GET 'EM OUT OF HERE." The protestors are then bodily pushed and shoved out of the arena, forming the basis for a lawsuit alleging that Trump incited the crowd to violence.

In this disturbing encounter, one sees a kind of symbiotic escalation: Donald Trump has encouraged the crowd to see the protestor-witnesses as enemies whose needs will weaken and damage them. The excitement of the crowd has been obviously mounting throughout the rally, and its energy seems to have encouraged Trump himself to cross a political red line by actively condoning violence. While American campaign rallies may be boisterous, such exchanges until this point have remained quite far from the norm. In the 2008 presidential campaign, for example, John McCain himself attempted to quell rally attenders who were viciously maligning Barack Obama (Weiner, 2008).

Leaders who are particularly narcissistic tend to feed on the energy and affirmation of crowds, which increase their sense of personal power. Such leaders are thus less likely to try to shape this energy, turning it away from raw emotion but toward constructive solutions to shared social problems. For such narcissistic leaders, the rush of emotional energy from the crowd becomes an end in itself. Otto Kernberg (1998) comments in this regard that leaders need an optimal degree of narcissism (enough so that they feel entitled and empowered to lead, but not so much that they become swallowed by the need for power and affirmation). They also need some degree of paranoia – enough to perceive and defend against challenges to their leadership so that the group or organization will feel secure – but not so much that they continually sap the group's energy with repetitive fight regressions. Observing Donald Trump's leadership is to be concerned that he has an excess of both paranoia and narcissism that does not serve his

constituents well. He loses himself in the intemperate narrative of “us” versus “them” and has difficulty stopping the process of feeding the crowd the ugly lines that they begin to crave.

Rice (1969) who integrated an open-systems theory of relationships within groups and larger social organizations with Bion's and Turquet's observations on group regressions, further advanced the field of organizational and large group analysis. Psychoanalysts following his model examine the context of each group – whether formally or informally assembled – and focus on its history, its' specific task and goals, and any intrinsic structural elements that exist that might impede the group from addressing their central work (see Alderfer, 1998; Shapiro & Carr, 1991). While seeing group regressions as ubiquitous in the life of any human group or organization (Shapiro, 1991), analysts from this background particularly study situations that inflame regressive processes. Leadership that is unrealistic, an organizational structure that thwarts goal achievement, a sub-group that remains unheard, or goals adopted by the group membership that are not reality-based constitute major factors in promoting or exacerbating group regressions (Kernberg, 1998; Rudden, Twemlow, & Ackerman, 2008). These analysts further examine fantasies that universally attach to specific group functions, such as boundary maintenance – a particular locus of fantasies involving the imagined dissolution of a group as it becomes “swallowed”, “contaminated”, or “infiltrated” by “foreigners”. The fantasies of purity versus contamination described earlier are common when a group perceives its boundaries being invaded by outsiders (e.g. immigrants) or when it perceives a sub-group as becoming too powerful (e.g. black citizens seeking to correct current inequities in criminal sentencing, police behavior, etc.).

This approach also holds that forces *within groups themselves may determine leadership style as much or more than does an individual leader's personality* (Shapiro & Carr, 1991). According to such an analysis, Donald Trump was elected not just because of his own ability to exploit rational and irrational fears and desires within American political culture, but his election also reflected and gave voice to these already existent and pressing national forces. Examining videotapes of Conservative Tea Party campaign rallies from past election cycles reveals an agitation for the kind of racist, nativist sentiments that Trump seized upon, gave voice to, inflamed and was himself inflamed by.

#### 4 | RAMIFICATIONS OF THE NARCISSISTIC, AUTHORITARIAN LEADER FOR GROUP FUNCTIONING

Some psychoanalysts have studied optimal group structures and types of leadership for groups, large and small, that will increase task functioning and decrease the chances of ensnaring regressions. Bion (1961) observed that, structurally, organizations in which boundaries for membership were somewhat flexible and all members had a voice and a role seemed less prone to destructive impasses. Rudden *et al.* (2008) found that groups with leaders who engaged their group's regressive energies and redirected them constructively had the best results in group task performance in a small prospective trial. In addition, leaders who could delegate aspects of their role to the members best equipped to fulfill them met their goals. Twemlow (2000) found that leadership that encourages a sense of belonging in each member of a group, of valuing each member's contribution, vastly discourages violent disruptions and bullying. He also found that group cohesion and optimal function is best ensured when a leader is motivated by altruism rather than by power concerns. These findings point to the dilemma for groups whose leader seems more bent on personal acclaim and power than on inclusiveness, on inflaming group regressive energies, rather than using them to focus on realistic task accomplishment.

Rene Kaes (2007), a psychoanalyst who has studied the deep roots of irrational social behavior, also observes that well-functioning groups must learn to accept that members can share different as well as overlapping ideals, goals and history. To accept difference means realizing that all group members are people with individual motivations and life-stories, who can contribute new perspectives to the joint work. Once such a basic realization is shared and is enacted, it becomes intrinsically more difficult to project group members' sadistic or vengeful fantasies onto those members who belong to a different group or sub-group. When the practice of this understanding is thwarted by a leader and by prominent group members who support him, group-life becomes increasingly irrational. When Trump labels people

as “protesters”, “bad hombres and rapists”, or “radical Islamic terrorists”, he encourages dangerous projective fantasies onto dehumanized “Others”. The sweeping lack of reality in these assessments deters the group from discovering realistic solutions to their struggle with, for example, creating viable boundaries with the outside. This dedicated focus on the projective, the inflammation of irrational intolerance, gives rise to increasingly psychotic group functioning. The group’s linguistic structure also becomes contaminated and restricted. Donald Trump’s repeated statements that carefully reported news analyses of his administration are “fake news” is an example of, and contributor toward, a psychotic degradation in group discourse.

Kaes also stresses that within any human group, members find themselves pressed into taking on particular roles, some of which fit well with their individual personae, others that feel strange, unfamiliar. Some members may be recruited by a particularly aggressive group ethos to become bullies, others scapegoats. In any group in which shared myths become reductive and remote from reality, some members will be recruited as “truth-tellers”. If group reality is increasingly oppressive, the inevitable unconscious recruitment of “liberators” will follow. In addition, group life will always find those who attempt to work out compromises, to achieve at least stasis or quiet, if not peace. Trump’s active and fairly consistent recruitment of bullies and myth-tellers is currently creating a pressure for members of the larger society outside of his immediate crowd of followers to stand up for ideals that have been previously held in common but that are now coarsened, and in defense of those people who have been scapegoated. For now, their efforts have not been squelched by force. Instead, there is a steady pressure by Trump and various media and political supporters to scorn and reject their voices. In the long run, historically, the pressure toward the expression of emotional truth, and toward the achievement of a realistic working narrative, will push large-group members to right the excesses encouraged by the narcissist-authoritarian. However, during the period in which this leader holds power, an increasing and prolonged divisiveness is inevitable, rendering constructive group work almost impossible. The greater the number of group members who become active in countering the authoritarian leader, the sooner his reign will be ended.

In sum, formal and informal human groups are powerfully affected by certain regressive emotional forces. These forces can become ascendant when groups are thwarted from performing their central tasks by structural problems or by problematic leadership. In the United States at present, an increasing division in income and education among citizens, along with other forces such as the increasing diversity of the population, changing cultural attitudes toward women and sexuality, etc. have resulted in a sense of threat to group identity, coherence and stability. The sense of threat with attendant projections has resulted in a degradation of national discourse, but simultaneously, in a search for a coherent narrative to help the nation face these challenges. A leader such as Donald Trump inflames projections and encourages a psychotic group process, and is himself inflamed by the group regression. Within a democratic republic, alternative group leaders will inevitably emerge: whether they will be thwarted by the current authoritarian trend is as yet unknown. With the increasing structural impediments to truly democratic processes such as gerrymandering, election restrictions, corruption of the media, or worse, the outcome remains to be seen.

## ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup> Trump made a similar, explicit promise, found to be fraudulent (National Public Radio, 2016), via his for-profit Trump University.

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