

ALENKA ZUPANČIČ

Politics on the Couch

What can psychoanalysis tell us about a new structure of authoritarian power that is gaining momentum across the world? On the basis of some of this power's prominent features and its structural configuration, I propose the name "paranoid power." However, since it also displays pronounced traits of perversion – particularly in the way it relates to its supporters and to other political powers – it may be more accurately captured by the term "perverse paranoia." The first part of this essay analyzes paranoia in its articulation with political power; the second examines the perverse inflection of this same configuration.

Since much of the analysis will focus on the example of Donald Trump and his current administration, it is important to stress that I do not perceive him or his personality as the root of the problem. A great deal had to happen in US society for someone like him to win the presidency once and then a second time. We should in no way become victims of a reversed Trumpian fantasy, cultivated by many Democrats, and simply believe that if Trump were removed, "America would be great again," and everything would be fine.

However, this is not to say that without Trump everything would be the same as it is now, since the problems that led to his election were systemic and largely independent of his persona: If there were no Trump, rising

authoritarian proto-fascism would likely have found another figure. Rather, we need to recognize that two levels are at work in this development, and keep both in view. We are sometimes so preoccupied with emphasizing systemic or structural causes that we miss a crucial conjunction: the point at which historical contingency does not merely fill a pre-existing structural place but actively shapes the systemic or structural itself.

In this sense, there exists what one might call a “fetishism of the systemic,” whereby the constant invocation of systemic reasons becomes a fetish that prevents us from seeing the actual points of weakness – of inconsistency, failure, or lack – within the system itself. This, in turn, leads to claims that nothing can be done unless we first change the system or remove its structural causes. And since there seems to be no way of changing the system *en bloc*, we remain stuck with the conclusion that “nothing can be done.” I believe psychoanalysis, beginning with Freud, teaches us a far more dialectical lesson.

In a paper published long ago in *Cahiers pour l'analyse*, and only recently translated to English,¹ Jaques Nassif develops a commentary of Freud's analysis of the fustigation fantasy (“A child is being beaten”). He takes up precisely this question of the relationship between the two levels (historical and structural) in the formation of fantasy. What is at stake, he argues, is neither simply a historical succession or development of fantasy through different “phases” or formulations (Freud identifies three), nor simply a disclosure of what in these phases is “structural” (atemporal). Rather, it is what Nassif calls *permutations*. The curious feature of these permutations is that they do not merely twist around some inflexible core structure, but seem to induce change in the structure and its relations themselves. The permutations can be said to take place at the level of historical development, but they are not reducible to it, since they also introduce something like a (trans)formation of the structural relations.

We should keep this lesson in mind when analyzing and envisioning social and political shifts as well. Trump's particular persona not only gave a very specific concrete form to pre-existing antagonisms and steered

¹ Jacques Nassif, “Fantasy in ‘A Child is Being Beaten.’”

them in a certain direction; it also contributed to their “becoming what they are,” so to speak. Even when a problem is “systemic,” the concrete form of its existence and further development is always shaped by some contingency – in this case, by Trump.

Paranoid Power ...

Dire economic circumstances, wars, genocides, social uncertainty and instability, and other forms of crisis: we can indeed observe that these are precisely the conditions in which social paranoia thrives. But is this enough to propose a direct causal relation between the two, and thus explain the rising social forms of paranoia by pointing to hardship, real crises, threats, and traumas to which many people are exposed? I believe that would be a serious mistake. While real, empirical conditions of hardship and insecurity certainly play an important role, the causality is more complex. This is already apparent if we consider the fact that there is no direct correlation between the degree of real hardship one experiences and a tendency, for example, to believe in conspiracy theories, one of the predominant social forms taken by contemporary paranoia. The most ardent advocates of conspiracy theories are seldom those who are the most destitute.

The key element of causality takes place on the level at which empirical hardship or crisis is narratively framed. By this I do not simply mean the explanations (and eventual scapegoats) offered to clarify *why* we are where we are. That also plays an important role, but what I have in mind is something more fundamental: namely, the characterization of “*where* we are.” That is to say, the emphasis is on *what* exactly happened to us, or is happening to us, rather than *why* we got there. (The latter certainly exists as well but belongs to another level.)

In other words, what is at stake is a narrative rendering – a designation of harm, of the status of our “wounds” – which then opens up a whole new playground or “platform” on which our hurt exists socially (also when we do not experience it directly), in relation to others, and as a basis for

possible “explanations,” like the naming of scapegoats and recipes for recovery. Crucially, this framing is done not just by some deprived, paranoid individuals but from the place of power and in its name.

If we look at how the present problems affecting a growing number of people are being framed by the populist right leaders – most prominently, but certainly not exclusively, in the US – what do we see? That they are being framed through the overarching rhetoric of “castration”: *We are being castrated; everybody wants to castrate and emasculate us; they want us to lose our power, potency, vitality, and enjoyment*; and so on. For example, we can detect this in the way the far right has appropriated the notion of “freedom of speech” – not as a civil right to protect critical voices but simply as a *right to enjoy*: In this discourse, the “loss of free speech” refers to the inability to insult others freely and to say whatever one feels like saying. Requirements of polite and considerate language, as well as prohibitions concerning symbols and rhetoric associated with, for example, Nazism and fascism, are increasingly presented as impediments to freedom understood as the freedom of enjoyment. In this sense, they are presented as “castrating.” There are also constant complains about the “feminization” of society.

This particular narrative framing, however, is not simply one possible framing among others but a singular one. And it resonates strongly with the paranoid position and structure, which pushes “castration” out of its symbolic dimension, so that it returns and remains operative only in the registers of the *imaginary and the real*. Moreover, if you keep telling people that they are being “castrated” – and I will give some examples in a moment – this is obviously not very empowering for them. The message, rather, is: *you are rendered impotent, and I – the populist leader – am the one in whom you should invest in order to feel that you are participating in power again*. It is a message that leaves people angry, outraged, and at the same time powerless.

The battle cry is thus: *We are being emasculated, and we cannot allow this. I, your leader, will not allow this!* As suggested, this is particularly evident in the US and in the everyday rhetoric of Trump’s politics. Everyone is accused of “stealing” from America, “ripping it off,” “taking advantage

of it”; the country is said to be invaded by “rapists and criminals” (referring to immigrants); LGBTQ people are “coming after our children” and want to “chemically castrate them.” People who criticize Trump are labeled as victims of TDS, Trump Derangement Syndrome (allegedly making people lose their rationality when it comes to Trump),² which is one of the ways the paranoid presuppositions of the far right are projected onto the opposition.³ Suggestively, as TDS is also the acronym for Testosterone Deficiency Syndrome, this naming performs a double function: accusing the other side of paranoia while simultaneously suggesting their “emasculatation.”

It is fascinating to observe to what extent the economy, the border, foreign policy, and domestic affairs all become highly *sexualized* in this worldview, and this sexualization revolves primarily around the crude opposition of “Powerful/Weak,” invoking and relying on fantasies of “castration.”

It is important to stress that I am not attempting to provide a deeper psychoanalytic reading of this rhetoric by pointing to some underlying fear or threat of castration. On the contrary, the rhetoric is quite explicit: the new authoritarian leaders *themselves* are the ones shouting “Castration!” and using this trope or “threat” to mobilize people. If anything, they act as amateur psychologists pressing the appropriate buttons in the population.

There is another peculiar trait at work in this instrumentalized “threat of castration”: the immediate threat is not presented as coming from some

2 Recently, Trump was reported to have used this TDS label – or, to quote his words, “mind-crippling disease” – to refer to Rob Reiner, shortly after Reiner and his wife were killed in their Hollywood home.

3 This, of course, does not mean that in recent years – and especially in the period leading up to the US elections – the exclusive focus on Trump within the Democratic camp, at the expense of all other problems, was not a reality. Unfortunately, it very much was, and the “obsession with Trump” is not merely a projection. As Slavoj Žižek has pointed out in an interview, Trump effectively functioned as a fetish that allowed Democrats to disavow their own shortcomings when it came to addressing the economic and social problems faced by a growing number of people. A similar problem can be found in some other countries as well, where the “Left” fails to counter the rise of proto-fascist movements in any way other than by urging voters that, “obviously,” they must vote *against* this or that populist leader.

other, competing great Power, but rather from those who are *already seen* as “emasculated” and “weak” (immigrants, women, trans people, etc.). True, there is also the suggestion of some other power-agency – like a “deep state” or “Brussels” – orchestrating this emasculation from behind the scenes. However, the important point is that the weapon of this other agency is not power or force but the *spread of weakness*.

Being weak (“emasculated”) is seen as contagious; it immediately corrupts the nature of the strong and powerful. This is why, for example, a simple mention in schools and kindergartens of the existence of gay and trans people is deemed capable of immediately corrupting the eternal and innate *Nature* of children, turning them all into gay or trans people – that is, into “emasculated people.” (This is indeed an interesting paradox: They claim, at the same time, that sexuality is rooted in the deepest layers of our biological nature, yet they also believe that a mere glimpse of – or even knowledge about – gay sexuality would have the effect of turning all children gay. In this sense, they appear to be the most ardent believers in the “social construction of gender.”) Similarly, immigrants are persecuted precisely when they are already most vulnerable *because* of their precarious status, and not simply as representatives of some other, alternative potency. And, according to Freud, this view of castration as “contagious” is an important aspect of paranoia.⁴

On the other hand, authoritarian leaders feel good in each other’s company, that is, in the company of other “powerful men.” There is something in this logic that suggests power is just as contagious as weakness: it rubs off on you. If you are in the company of the powerful, power rubs off on you. If you are in the company of the weak, it is weakness (“emasculated”) that rubs off on you. In spite of the ideological differences, Trump obviously feels good in Putin’s company, and treats him with a respect that is completely missing from his dealing with his “weak” ally, Volodymyr Zelensky.

⁴ Freud pointed this out in his study of phobia (Sigmund Freud, “Analysis of phobia in a five-year-old boy [‘Little Hans’],” in: *The Pelican Freud Library, Case Histories I*, Vol. 8), as well as in his study of paranoia (Sigmund Freud, “Psychoanalytic notes on an autobiographical account of a case of paranoia (dementia paranoides) [Schreber],” in: *The Pelican Freud Library Case Histories II*, Vol. 9).

It should be stressed, however, that the truly detrimental aspect of this position is not simply the alliance of the “powerful” against the “weak,” but rather that this rhetoric and imagery of power obfuscate a very different reality: this “power” is fundamentally a paranoid power – a power of paranoia, which only makes it more, rather than less, dangerous.

For the point is not that since these leaders are themselves showing clear signs of paranoia, they are therefore in truth “weak” and scared, not really as powerful and confident as they pretend to be – as if such an exposure could somehow make them lose their harmful power. It simply doesn’t, and we can observe this practically every day. They won’t “deflate” if we expose them as “in fact” weak, because this specific paranoid weakness is precisely what brought them to power under current conditions – and it is what keeps them there. Put differently: They won’t collapse if we expose them, because their power is not symbolic power, at least not primarily. Of course, this is not to say that their power is harmless or incapable of hurting us – quite the contrary.

It is a power that exists only as an accumulated, *real*, and material force – military or police power, violence, direct pressure, and, of course, wealth (we are talking about some of the wealthiest individuals in the world). The flip side of this is the paranoid assumption that most people do not truly or sufficiently *respect* them. The old adage that respect cannot be bought or forced into existence still holds true, but in the case of paranoid power, this truth only leads to increased displays of force in search of the other’s breaking point.

Mladen Dolar concisely formulates Hannah Arendt’s reflections on authority: Symbolic authority essentially functions as a *postponed threat*, a *suspended force* or violence. It works as “authority” only for as long as it does not need to directly deploy force. The moment it does, “authority loses its authority.”⁵ We could say that in relation to authority, *authoritarianism* starts at the opposite end: It begins as an already lost authority (it

⁵ Mladen Dolar, *Od kod prihaja oblast?*, 29. This, of course, does not mean that symbolic authority is simply non-violent, but rather that it exercises a different form of violence – symbolic violence. This difference, however, leads to two very different logics of power and order.

usually starts with force and the realization of threats) and tries to make its way back to the impossible point of the coincidence of symbolic authority with the real. In authoritarianism, authority is over-realized; authoritarianism is all about “realization” (“We do things, and we do them efficiently – not just talk about them”), yet at the same time this “realization” desperately tries to reach a point of *symbolic efficiency* (that is, the “efficiency of talk” itself), which remains inaccessible to it. This inaccessibility of “symbolic efficiency” is the driving force of the “surplus realization” and of its emphasis on the *executive* dimension: on the doing, the managing, the enforcing.

The flood of executive orders we are witnessing lately is not merely a strategy to overwhelm the opposition. It is also a *need* that drives this particular authoritarian order, which operates through a peculiar combination of paranoia and perversion.⁶ Or should we say that, in the position of symbolic power, paranoia becomes a form of perversion?

The more passionately this kind of authoritarianism tries to reach the point of pure symbolic authority, the more violent it becomes, the more raw is the force that it deploys. From its perspective, it is not the signifier that forges reality; rather, force is applied to reality in order for it to (finally) produce and spit out its own signifier. And this is the point where it becomes perverse: the paranoid idea that signifiers are hiding in the real meets here the perverse logic of *forcing reality to itself produce what it is lacking*.

This is important if we are to understand the peculiar combination, in these authoritarian orders, of “naturalism” (biologism) and “symbolism.” The current obsession of the Trump administration with “biological sex” – which also accompanies the rise of the far right in many other countries – has everything to do with this. It is also no surprise that the focus is (again, as so often throughout history) on women.

Defining what a “woman” is thus – comically or sinisterly – became a number one priority of the state. *One of the first* executive orders signed

⁶ As suggested by Marie Bendtsen at the international conference “Reawakening Freud,” held at the Copenhagen University on January 17-18, 2025.

by President Trump after he took office (in the midst of major world crises and domestic social problems) was titled “Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government.”⁷ The way the order goes about this goal is well illustrated in its article (b): “‘Women’ or ‘woman’ and ‘girls’ or ‘girl’ shall mean adult and juvenile human females, respectively.”

It is difficult not to see in this ouroboric definition a curious echo of the impossibility that Lacan pointed to in his famous dictum: “The Woman doesn’t exist.” That is to say, “Woman” does not exist as a complementary, signifying counterpart to “Man.” Which is something quite unacceptable for this world-view based on fantasies of complementarity and completeness. And it is a fact that the imperative to make the Woman exist on a signifying level as complementary counterpart to “men” has always played a role in the most brutal repression of women. Women have historically been repressed not by the erasure of their symbolic identity but by being assigned one – by being told what they are, and what that means.

We can also see in the executive order how and why policing “trans” and policing “women” are essentially part of the same agenda. “Trans” functions as the surplus object in which the *lack* of a signifier for the “other sex” appears as something positive, something visible and external. The underlying idea is that if you remove this surplus object, women will be “whole” again; they will function as the proper signifying counterpart to men, and this restored complementarity will resolve the sexual as well as social (non-)relation.

In other words, the Trumpian “real men” are not afraid of the Woman as a possible signifying counterpart to their own manhood; they are afraid of women as the other sex with whom they share the *same* signifier, despite their different sexualities. This is the Lacanian point: sexual

⁷ It has been reported that in September 2025 a senior English instructor at Texas A&M was fired for stating that gender and biological sex were not equivalent. The statement offended a student in her class, who claimed that the instructor violated this same Executive order. Jo Yurcaba, “Texas A&M over gender identity lesson in literature course,” NBC, September 10, 2025, <https://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-news/texas-m-fires-professor-gender-identity-lesson-literature-course-rna230337>.

difference functions across an irreducible “sameness” – the sexes share the same lack, represented by the phallic signifier. What these “real men” reject is precisely this phallic signifier – *phallus as signifier* – because it already presupposes “castration.” Their obsessive attachment to anything phallic or phallic-shaped is a direct correlate of this. It only works for them if *they* are full of it, or if *it* is full of them. They are like the Chief of Police in Jean Genet’s ingenious and prophetic play *The Balcony*.

To return to a previous point: “Real men” like Trump are “the most powerful,” “the greatest,” yet the symbolic dimension of this power is still lacking. The obverse of this absence is a compulsive need to fill the lack of symbolic power with the real – with the display of “real” power. This megalomaniac self-assurance goes hand-in-hand with an obsession to eliminate all traces that could contest this power, challenge it, or subject it to critique. What we used to call critical thinking is being hit by a tsunami of this obverse side of confident megalomania – which is the paranoid inability to perceive critical arguments as anything other than direct, physical threats to one’s integrity.

So yes, these “real men” remain “paranoid,” but they are no less dangerous because of it. In fact, this makes them all the more harmful. Which is why, when mockery – pointing out their “true weakness” – becomes our only response, the joke is on us. All the more so because, when combined with state power, this dynamic becomes truly explosive.

This “realization” of symbolic power – the attempt to fill symbolic power with empirical force – also echoes J.-A. Miller’s proposition that, in paranoia, *jouissance* is located in the Other itself (that is, in the symbolic frame, which is normally devoid of *jouissance*). It involves locating the *other* in the *Other*, or even substituting the *Other* with the *other*.⁸ And this, again, underscores the perhaps unexpected proximity between authoritarianism and paranoia.

⁸ Jacques-Alain Miller, “Paranoia, Primary Relation to the Other,” 81, 85.

... With a Twist of Perversion

Let us now move to another aspect of this authoritarian power. We will continue with the example of Trump, because today “Trump” is no longer simply a person named “Donald Trump.” He has become what Gilles Deleuze would call a *conceptual persona* or *conceptual character* – or, in another register, a *brand name* for a certain kind of politics, a certain way of doing politics. This brand now extends far beyond the individual and is spreading rapidly in many countries.

It is not simply that other politicians and leaders *imitate* his style, his inconsistency, and his extravagance. Rather, something a bit more complex and interesting is taking place. (NATO chief Mark Rutte recently referring to him as “Daddy who sometimes has to use strong language” is an important exposure of this.) Not only does he have imitators and doubles (like Javier Milei in Argentina), Trump is also providing a roof, a backing, and a thrust for another kind of reactionary political agenda, one which is in effect not much different and no less catastrophic, albeit less extravagant and less blatantly ridiculous.

Perhaps we should extend the Freudian analysis of the mass formation and “group psychology” to cover not only the relation of a leader to his people (supporters), but also the relation of this particular leader to the global political class that governs us, that is to other leading politicians.

One conceptually interesting feature of Trump’s singular persona is that it seems to invent and propose something I am tempted to call a *fetishization of inconsistency*. Inconsistency certainly is an essential ingredient of Trump’s brand: Today it is this, tomorrow the opposite; he says one thing and does the opposite; and so on. Yet, this inconsistency is not simply a weakness to be exposed by the opponents of such politics. It is one of the central ingredients of its success. Indeed, this has been demonstrated hundreds of times: pointing out contradictions and absurdities, exposing falsehoods, or tracking radical shifts of position proves to be an utterly ineffective line of attack when it comes to Trump and his brand of politics. If anything, such critiques only reinforce its strength.

A perhaps crucial element in the geopolitical dynamic that we are witnessing is that Trump personally takes upon himself the contradiction deeply embedded in this brand of politics. He offers himself as a villain, and proposes a deal. He offers to embody the contradiction, or the dirty side of the present political and economic order; he carries it proudly, thereby allowing the rest of the political caste, as well as the rest of us, to disavow it. At work here is a very strong – and often sickening – complicity between Trump and what once passed for a moderate center-right.

A good place to analyze this complicity, and the way it functions, is in the speech he delivered at the Charlie Kirk commemoration rally. It is an almost textbook, laboratory case of Trump stepping in and offering to embody the most striking contradiction that emerged within that particular situation, all in order to consolidate his “followers” around his political agenda and to unleash a war on anything and anyone who fails to share this political agenda or dares to oppose it.

In the case of the discussed example, the basic contradiction has to do with Christianity and Christian values, which Kirk declared to embody, and his racist, misogynist, homophobic, anti-immigrant, and pro-guns views that he advocated for so loudly and, it seems, so effectively.

In any case, here we are, at the Kirk mass commemoration rally, organized and promoted as a celebration of his life as illustrious, even saintly, and as an enthronement and consolidation of everything he represented as a model Christian life, which – obviously, since he was shot – is portrayed as being in danger and under threat by extremely evil and powerful forces (“the radical left” – whatever this means, and we know it can cover just about anything that is not compatible with MAGA views).

In her speech, Kirk’s widow, Erika, emphasized forgiveness: like Jesus Christ, she said, Charlie would forgive the young man who shot him. Her speech was full of tears, love, and charitable sentiments.

Then Trump spoke. Here is a particularly interesting part of his speech:

He [Charlie] did not hate his opponents; he wanted the best for them. Here I disagreed with Charlie. *I hate* my opponent [strongly, passionately emphasizing the word “hate,” and continuing in this emphatic manner], and *I don’t*

want the best for them! I'm sorry, I'm sorry Erika, ... but I can't stand my opponents. [The crowds are cheering. And then he continues, pointing at the sky:] Charlie is angry. Look at that, he is angry at me now. He wasn't interested in demonizing anyone; he was interested in persuading everyone to the ideas and principles he believed were good, right, and true. Before each appearance he prayed these words: "God, use me for your will." Always said the same thing. "Use me for your will." And that is exactly what God did.⁹

(After that, Trump continued his speech by painting the "horrible violence" and methods of the left, and the threatening danger it presents, and which he is here to stop...)

Before going into the analysis of the first part of Trump's rhetoric, let us point out the properly *perverse*, indeed sadist, hue of the emphasis on Kirk being the (willing) *instrument of God's will*. Lacan pinned this down most succinctly: The pervert always presents himself as the Instrument of the Other, of the Other's will. The pervert is not the one who enjoys unrestrainedly and without scruples; he has a job to do; he works for the enjoyment of the Other; he is the instrument of the enjoyment of the Other.¹⁰

The quoted part of Trump's speech did of course get some attention among the critical public. The emphasis on hate was duly exposed as the fact that he spoke out the unspoken truth of this rally. But let us think about this speech and its function a bit further, for it was a true masterpiece of the performance of Trumpism, and it provides the key to both his populist success and to the way enjoyment circulates within it.

Trump has always been admired by his supporters for allegedly "speaking his mind" and "saying it as it is," for not pretending that he is or feels any different from what he says, even when this goes against the rules of politeness and even against common decency. He is perceived as *saying out loud what everybody thinks*. This is often taken as a form of courage in the midst of political and diplomatic "hypocrisy," and as a promising start for "getting things done."

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dymO80og57I>.

¹⁰ See Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book X. Anxiety*, 165.

But if we stop at this analysis – *he is saying out loud what everybody thinks* – we miss a crucial dimension of his rhetoric, one which is much more concrete and specific. What Trump says out loud, and what others do not dare to say even if they feel it, is always something *nasty*, charged with violent, illicit emotions and enjoyment, such as his emphatic declaration, “*I hate my opponent!*”

He gives voice both to the violence and the illicit enjoyment that form the hidden underside of the “good, right, and true” ideas presented here as Christian. He does not deny this underside, pretend it isn’t there, or ask us to ignore it and play the standard “hypocrisy” game. Instead, he proposes something else: to stage the contradiction, to blow it up to its full proportions (or even beyond all proportions), and to offer himself as the one who will take care of its dark side.

This is the key to the configuration staged and deployed at the Charlie Kirk rally. Kirk was cast as a man of Christian ideas and principles, a “missionary” (Trump’s word). But, as history shows, the spreading and establishment of Christian rule has also required crusades and crusaders to do the dirty work.

The message – or, more accurately, *the deal* – offered by Trump to the American people (and we know how much he likes a “good deal”) was this: “We are all Christians. But Christianity is under attack, so we have a problem. You go on being Christians; keep feeling good about your Christianity and your Christian values, and I will do the dirty work for you. You do the Christian thing, while I will hate for you, persecute immigrants and other Others for you, even kill them if necessary.”

It is in this sense that I spoke earlier of a fetishization of inconsistency or contradiction. Inconsistency and contradiction are not hidden, suppressed, or obfuscated; on the contrary, they are blatantly and shamelessly paraded by the leader-figure as a trademark. He even states it quite directly: *I’m a Christian, and I hate everyone who crosses my way!* If we simply rush to denounce this as a contradiction or inconsistency, we miss the point entirely. The contradiction must be exposed in order for this maneuver – this “deal” – to function. He is meant to embody, stage, and perform both terms at the same time.

Fetishization of contradiction thus means something quite precise here: The contradiction is, so to speak, *frozen* – taken out of circulation and out of history, where it might otherwise serve as a motor – and used instead as a fetish that prevents us from seeing the problem. There is nothing revelatory about it. On the contrary, insofar as the contradiction functions as a fetish, its very exposure serves its own obfuscation.

The effect of this maneuver on many other Western leaders, and particularly European leaders, is quite stunning. Apart from those who directly embrace his positions, and the few who remain fully critical (also in their actions), a great majority have a far more “intimate” and complex relationship with Trump: they buy into the deal he proposes, even as they roll their eyes whenever he speaks.

One of the clearest – and most disturbing – manifestations of this logic came when German Chancellor Friedrich Mertz remarked that Benjamin Netanyahu, backed by Trump – while killing tens of thousands of Palestinians – was doing the (necessary) “dirty job” for all of us, and we should be grateful for this. In this framing, we Europeans can go on living our lives and clinging to our precious, delicate “European values,” while the bullies do the dirty work for us – and a really dirty work at that. Many, many things would need to change in the global geopolitical configuration to dismantle this sinister complicity.

Those of us who are not particularly thrilled by fantasies of how the rise of the far right will “make the world great again” are numbed by the spectacle of everything sliding into disaster. We feel that we are living in imminent proximity to catastrophe. Except that for many, catastrophe is already their reality – and we can watch it play out live.

The belief that the present bullying politics can protect us from this destiny, from this same thing happening to us, if only we are willing to accept the price of such protection (the necessary “dirty job”), is profoundly mistaken. Not only for the obvious reasons but also because a *paranoid power* tends to turn very quickly against its own people and its own allies, as we can already see in the case of the United States. In the end, what such powers claim so desperately to protect us against may well prove rather benign compared with the *catastrophe of their protection*

itself. This catastrophe is very real, and we are already deeply involved in it.

In conclusion, let us take a step backwards and examine in some more detail what takes place in the “Trumpian gesture,” and how it affects and engages different positions on the political chessboard.

What happens in this maneuver of bringing the other, dirty side to the surface during some ecstatic, often crisis-induced moments also and less perceptibly involves something else: it defines and redefines what the dirty side is to begin with.

In other words, we should not simply say that such moments bring to the surface what has always already been there (only hidden), because they do something else. The passage to the surface *itself* creates what was there, and radically changes its status from something inadmissible to something that must be, *because of this very fact*, desirable and “true.” It involves a kind of primitive understanding of psychoanalysis, according to which the liberation of repressed desires equals their “realization,” and according to which what is repressed must, for this very reason, be something good, worthy of being “liberated.”

We could in fact compare this to what does, or does not, happen in analysis. When in analysis some things that were inadmissible to consciousness, and hence repressed, become conscious, this as a rule – or ideally – implies a reconfiguration of a whole set of relations as well as the disappearance of the symptoms that expressed the illicit thought in other, displaced ways. In other words, the pathological relations change. If the inadmissible thought was *I want to kill my sibling*, then bringing it to consciousness does not make it “acceptable” or okay to act upon this impulse. Instead, it invites us to work through the contradictory demands and impulses that exercise pressure on us, from the outside as well as from the inside.

The Trumpian maneuver, on the other hand, is not about the reconfiguration and change of the given situation; on the contrary, it is about its solidification (and consolidation), and about profiting from it. The profit comes from the fact that, with his “transgressive” move, he does not remove the repression (on the side of his people) and instead uses it to

his own advantage. It is precisely the maintenance of the repression that makes it possible for him to propose the “deal” that he proposes, namely to do the “dirty job” on behalf of the “society.”

Note also that Trump did not even speak of “enemies” but of “opponents”: *I hate my opponent! I can't stand my opponent!* The question we need to ask at this point is not how such an open avowal of one's dirty enjoyment is possible but rather: What is hidden in this “open avowal of one's dirty enjoyment,” and even more importantly, what does this avowal aim at?

What is at stake here is something which is also at the center of cases of exhibitionist flashing, i. e., showing his Thing to you: it aims at making an object (of enjoyment) emerge on your side and to produce a split (shame, disgust or fascination). In *exposing* himself as he likes to do (*I hate my opponent!*) Trump does not simply openly show, reveal his dirty enjoyment. For what is at stake in this configuration is actually not so much the *enjoyment* (that is) *exposed* as it is *the enjoyment of the effect this exposure produces in others, in the Other*. This is what the exhibitionist is after, what he makes emerge and brings about on the side of the other. Exhibitionism implies and involves much more than narcissistic bragging.

Here, a very interesting interplay develops between Trump, his adversaries, and his supporters. His exhibitionism always addresses two (kinds of) audiences. In many ways, his supporters are less fascinated by Trump himself and by what he does than they are joyfully rewarded by the effects his actions and words produce in his opponents (“the Democrats,” “the liberals”). It is the outrage and the screaming of the latter that give them real enjoyment: the spectacle of what Trump manages to provoke on the other political side. In this sense, they occupy the position of spectators of an exhibitionist scene, which they enjoy indirectly. They enjoy the effects that Trump's self-exposure produces in the Others.

I would further venture that this structure is not limited to Trump. Something similar can be observed, for example, in relation to Putin. There are people on the Western left who do not particularly like Putin *per se*, yet are drawn to the effects his actions produce on the Western Other. This is why one way of being “critical” of Western policies – if one lives in

the West – can take the form of enjoying the embarrassment and reactions of Western leaders provoked by Putin.

Properly speaking, this game is perverse, as is our participation in it – a participation stripped of desire but sustained by enjoyment.

This article is a result of the research program P6-0014 “Conditions and Problems of Contemporary Philosophy” and the research project J6-4613 “Conceptualizing the End: its Temporality, Dialectics, and Affective Dimension,” both funded by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency.

Bibliography

- Dolar, Mladen. *Od kod prihaja oblast?* Ljubljana: Društvo za teoretsko psihoanalizo, 2021.
- Freud, Sigmund. "Analysis of phobia in a five-year-old boy ['Little Hans']." In: *The Pelican Freud Library, Case Histories I*, Vol. 8. Eds. James Strachey, Angela Richards, and Alan Tyson. Trans. Alix and James Strachey. London: Penguin, 1977.
- . "Psychoanalytic notes on an autobiographical account of a case of paranoia (dementia paranoides) [Schreber]." In: *The Pelican Freud Library Case Histories II*, Vol. 9. Eds. James Strachey and Angela Richards. Trans. James Strachey. London: Penguin, 1979.
- Lacan, Jacques. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X: Anxiety*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. A. R. Price. Cambridge (UK): Polity, 2014.
- Miller, Jacques-Alain. "Paranoia, Primary Relation to the Other." *The Lacanian Review* 10 (2020): 57–91.
- Nassif, Jacques. "Fantasy in 'A Child is Being Beaten.'" *Filozofski vestnik* 46, 3 (2025; forthcoming).