

# Trump *versus* Fromm: Breaking Bad<sup>1</sup>

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“The sadistic tendency is the wish to make others suffer or to see them suffer. This suffering can be physical, but more often it is mental suffering. Its aim is to hurt actively, to humiliate, embarrass others, or to see them in embarrassing and humiliating situations.”

Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*



Carlos Barria/Reuters

## THE BEGINNINGS OF SADISM

It has always been clear to the media and the discerning public that from the start of his relatively successful political period, Donald Trump has built a discourse based on lies about everything and everyone. This was a constant in his campaign: against Mexicans, Muslims, women, the disabled, war veterans, and Afro-Americans. And it continues unabated now that he is ensconced in the presidency.

This constant was not enough for his candidacy to deflate. Toward the end of the campaign, the polls put him critically close to Hillary Clinton and the final heroic deed was performed by Vladimir Putin, whose intervention in the Democratic campaign’s operating system handed Trump the win. One of the reasons for this is that there is an entire sector of very resentful U.S. Americans who identified with the Republican discourse, thanks in part to the fact that the magazine guaranteed ratings for the media and also surprisingly managed to impose his agenda and manipulate them given his undeniable media stature.

More than five years ago, Trump had already publicly demanded Barack Obama present his birth certificate. He wanted him to prove he was a U.S. citizen, that he had not been born in Kenya, and that he had not later been educat-

ed in Indonesia in the Muslim faith, facts that Obama was supposedly hiding. Trump also demanded that the then-president present prove that he had graduated from Harvard Law School and that he had also become the first Afro-American to be elected president of the *Harvard Law Review*.

In a single stroke, the undesirable Mr. Trump questioned that the Democrat was a U.S. American, a Christian—a religion that Obama does indeed profess—and that he was intellectually capable of being a respected lawyer graduated from a prestigious university. Obama did present his birth certificate, and even then, Trump insisted it could be a fake. In two words: pure sadism.

Trump spread doubts about Obama’s citizenship and other qualities to disqualify him as president; with that he laid the foundations for the strengthening of the hyper-conservative movement, the so-called “birthers,” that sprang up in 2008. Later we heard that during the presidential campaign, hounded by the media, Trump emphatically said, “Obama was born in the U.S. Period.” Just like that, tyrannically, and with no apology. Clearly his immediate objective was to win the Afro-American vote. The Afro-American congressional caucus rejected Trump’s peculiar *mea culpa*, classifying it as fake and demanding a public apology.

Patricia J. Williams writes, “Trump doesn’t want to lead the country—he wants to lead a culture war.”<sup>2</sup> And, in effect,

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Trump has followed the textbooks of the Alt Right, which he has been associated with since before being president, and which is aligned with white supremacy and nationalism, anti-Semitism —“We’re not racists; we just hate the Jews” is one of their slogans—, right-wing populism, nativism, and the neo-reactionary movement. All these currents of extremist white nationalism, including the Ku Klux Klan and its Grand Wizard David Duke (former candidate to the Senate who has supported Trump, who in turn has not distanced himself from him) are anti-feminist, anti-multiculturalists, anti-pluralist, anti-Muslim, anti-black, and anti-Latino. In short, they are not democrats and they lean toward totalitarianism. They are the ones marking the direction of the Trump narrative, and it is to his followers —today empowered— to whom this narrative is aimed.

They think that white people are genetically predisposed to being more honorable and intelligent than the black population and that some races are inherently superior to others. They reject the idea that the races are basically equivalent or interchangeable. Added to the most aggressive misogynist-xenophobic project in the history of the United States and cultural insularity is the trade and economic insularity that Trump preaches at every opportunity. This view defends the idea of the “Fortress American” and the right to civic-social belonging as a function of a racial right; therefore, it denies membership in the nation to any race that is not white, based on its being “the other.” That is how Trump represents and preaches a return to the U.S. apartheid that was so damaging to the country’s social fabric. More of Trumpism’s sadism.

It is also a fact —polemics included— that job losses are not the only thing that have created a resentful mass of people who have become the ideal recipients of the nationalist, nativist discourses dominant mainly in Central Europe and now in the United States under Trump. Added to this resentment is the defense of racial and religious rights in the process of establishing order and social organization. All of this includes a rejection of the huge number of migrants pouring in due to the negative effects of globalization, of the wars, and the local conflicts in the Middle East and Northern Africa.

Whiteness and Christianity over blackness and Islam in Europe. In the United States, it’s the same; added to this the rejection of the migrant “other,” mainly of Latino origin, and the old negritude that defines the United States historically. Not to mention the phobia against Muslims, guilty in this discourse of terrorist penetration.

More than his supposed mental imbalance, Trump is the pure discursive expression of that discontent that exists in different sectors of U.S. society. This is a majority white, lower-middle-class, aging population without much schooling, having stagnated in middle and high school, and, that as a result, has gotten mired down in the face of the swift advances of globalization.

In the short time since his inauguration, Trump has not been capable of presenting a comprehensive proposal that convinces the majority of voters, not even of his permanent electoral clientele. In addition to his generalizations —NAFTA; Mexico and China, *guilty* of the economic crisis; Muslims, *guilty* of the security crisis, etc.—, Trump has challenged the limits of the ridiculous and has spent his time exhibiting his demagoguery and pathological lying, leading the *New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, local dailies, and members of the political and economic establishment to emphatically reject him. This, even though the social and economic polarization are rooted in the system that they are a part of.

These important sectors of public opinion are frightened of Trump’s temperament. His lack of control is perceived as potential incompetence and clumsiness in the art of governing for all; and all of this could turn into the generation of bigger local and global crises than the U.S. is already facing, particularly at this time of relative decline in its hegemony —attacking North Korea and Iran from the UN has been counterproductive, for example.

With Trump at the head, Washington has begun an even greater process of local and global polarization —perhaps irreversible—, since he has no conciliatory proposals for solving problems: his are all total, inflexible recipes. If this migrates to the global order, we will be in the presence of the most unilateralist government in history. This will mean that we could witness the risk of the North Atlantic pact ending given his demand to condition the existence of NATO, among other delicate issues with grave implications, even though his military advisors, starting with Secretary of Defense James Mattis, are the ones who rein him in every time he goes too far —which is every day.

## THE FALL

*The New York Times* called it the “Republican Hell.” Donald Trump’s words, lies, and affronts are becoming his own prison. Like a self-fulfilling prophesy, he is in the middle of a shipwreck, long-anticipated since he was a candidate. He is constantly in free fall and his approval ratings have not returned to the 40-percent mark he had when he took office.

Trump has achieved several things with the complacency of the Republican Party: he has managed to break apart Lincoln’s party more than it already was, condemning it to a painful, perilous renewal process. From the moment that he began his pre-campaign with a discourse charged with pathological lying impulses, slinging insults at all his opponents; from June 2015 when he accused Mexicans of being rapists and delinquents, and later when he threatened to veto Muslim citizens and scorned a Gold Star Muslim military family (veterans and fallen in war); when he attacked women calling them “dogs” and “pigs,” until now, after nine months in the White House, he does not have a single achievement to show for it, even with regard to Obamacare (which cost him dearly when the Senate voted against his alternative); not to mention his regressive attempts in the fields of education and migration and the lack of cohesion in his cabinet, who are afraid of him and in frank retreat —i.e., the recent firing of his Health Secretary Tom Price, among 14 important collaborators who have also been fired. This says it all.

Pick any topic you want (the wall; Islam; white supremacists; relations with North Korea, China, Iran, Mexico, Germany, Russia, Cuba, or Australia; cultural wars; the health system; denial of global warming; infrastructure; natural disasters like Hurricane Maria; and a long, long “etcetera”), and we can see that the chief executive has lost his way and control over the situation, which complicates his staying in office. At this point of his self-destructive, wasted presidency, no matter what Donald Trump does, he is perceived as fake, a liar, and even perverse. In short, this is a period of such regression that the U.S. government is not only discommodulated, it is in the biggest institutional crisis since Richard Nixon fired Special Prosecutor Archibald Cox as part of his “Madman” strategies during the ill-fated days of Watergate when he was trying to intimidate his opponents showing apparent emotional instability.

In his attempts to fight the establishment, Trump’s stubborn narcissism and utter ignorance of public affairs makes him incapable of understanding his constitutional obligations

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and the separation of powers in U.S. democracy. Until now, the latter has been maintained thanks mainly to the federalism within which local governments have acted against his measures, containment actions of the judiciary, and, to a certain extent, the actions of Congress.

Added to his lack of sensitivity, surpassed only by his megalomania, Trump shows himself as an actor without the slightest democratic conviction. His style is personalist and authoritarian. This is an unbalanced actor in permanent emotional crisis, insecure and paranoid, who is putting the U.S. constitutional order at serious risk, along with the many local and global agreements that he is consistently dissolving —G5+1 is a grave case in point.

It is Trump and his ego against the world and anyone who questions him. He is caught in a zero-sum game in defense only of himself and in which his sole objective is to win, regardless of national interests and security. The institutional wear and tear caused by Trumpism has meant that the president is being devoured by all the devils he has awakened, and things are becoming worse and worse as a result of the appearance of an ignorant, grotesque, sadistic despot in the purest style described by Erich Fromm in the magnificent work in which he draws a portrait of an authoritarian, perverse leader whose only thought was to get and preserve power for power’s sake, in order to satisfy his sick ego-centrism more than to govern democratically and wisely for his people.<sup>3</sup> ■■■

## NOTES

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<sup>2</sup> Patricia J. Williams, “Trump Doesn’t Want to Lead the Country —He Wants to Lead a Culture War,” *The Nation*, September 26-October 3, 2016, <https://www.thenation.com/article/trump-doesnt-want-to-lead-the-country-he-wants-to-lead-a-culture-war/>.

<sup>3</sup> Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (New York: Open Road, Integrated Media, first published in 1941).