

FEATURE

Decoding Donald Trump: The Triumph of Trickster Politics

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“The so-called civilized man has forgotten the trickster. He remembers him only figuratively and metaphorically, when, irritated by his own ineptitude, he speaks of fate playing tricks on him or of things being bewitched. He never suspects that his own hidden and apparently harmless shadow has qualities whose dangerousness exceeds his wildest dreams. As soon as people get together in masses and submerge the individual, the shadow is mobilized, and, as history shows, may even be personified and incarnated.”
Carl G Jung, *On the Psychology of the Trickster Figure* (1954)

These days the entire world is trying hard to make sense of Donald Trump’s surprising march towards the Republican convention in Cleveland. Like it or not, he is possibly also on his way to becoming America’s next president. Trump seems hard to place within any of our available

categories: Is he a conservative populist? Is he a revolutionary? Is he left or right wing Republican — or is he both, or is he neither? Is he a demagogue? Is he a “charismatic” figure? Or is Trump really just a (bad) joke?

When bewildered, we search for historical analogies. To many observers, Trump resembles Silvio Berlusconi, the (in)famous tycoon who was prime Minister of Italy on and off from 1994 to 2011. Rula Jebreal was quick to point out such similarities in a Washington Post column this past September, [prophetically warning Americans that Trump would emulate Berlusconi's road to power.](#)

“Both are loud, vain, cheeky businessmen, amateur politicians and professional womanizers,” echoed Italian columnist, Beppe Severgnini, in [his piece](#) last fall in *The New York Times*. On either side of the Atlantic, a profusion of articles have traced the similarities between these two figures, comparing their often sexist and racist language, their media power, their salesman attitude to politics, their trouble with justice, their unreliability, and their substantial ignorance about foreign policy. After Trump retweeted an Italian saying made famous by the Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini, the American historian Ruth Ben-Ghiat, an expert of Italian Fascism, [likened Trump, Berlusconi, and Mussolini under the category of “charismatic personalities.”](#) all embodying a very similar “cult of power.”

All of these commentaries are full of evident truth, for yes, the similarities are indeed striking. Still, none of the commentary we have been offered on Trump actually answers the real question: why on earth are people willing to pay credit to such a figure? In other words, how can we really understand his power?

The first point to stress is that the notion of “charisma” is completely off the point. The ancient concept of charisma was introduced into modern politics by German sociologist Max Weber: “charisma will be applied to a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities.” The charismatic leader as strong and honest by nature, endowed with the gift of grace. In his famous talk, *Politics as a Vocation* (1919), Weber added further detail. Genuine charismatic leaders are passionate personalities with great oratorical skills who manage to balance passion with “matter-of-factness,” avoiding pure and “sterile excitation” of the masses, always channeling affective mobilization toward a concrete cause: “The ‘strength’ of a political ‘personality’ means, in the first place, the possession of these qualities of passion, responsibility, and proportion.”

Responsibility, for Weber, involves a duty to truthfulness — to speak the truth, even when it is not pleasing. The charismatic person must control a negative impulse that can easily tempt the political leader: vanity. Vanity,

says Weber, is conducive to two sins: lack of objectivity and irresponsibility. A charismatic leader must never be driven by power in and for itself.

Weber also gave a concrete example of what such a political leader would look like: Pericles, the great ancient Greek statesman whose personal skills were crucial to the Golden Age of Athens.

Trump? Exceptional qualities? Forget it, he ticks none of Weber's boxes. Actually, he ticks all of Weber's not-to-do boxes.

So how can we understand his success? We would like to launch another hypothesis that seems more congruent with the facts we have at our disposal: Trump is not a charismatic personality — he is a political trickster.

In order to illustrate, let us understand what the trickster is all about. The trickster is a universal figure, appearing in myths across cultures. The trickster is a figure of excess, especially of eating and drinking, and of sexual exploits, often depicted with an enormous phallus — the very grotesqueness of his figure denoting an inversion of order. The trickster is a breaker of taboos, a joker and prankster, the best of companions, but also a thief, a liar and an impostor; the mediator between the gods and the humans, a figure of shadow and night, the one who accompanies the soul of the dead into the underworld, snatching himself a soul now and again. In many storylines, the trickster is a vagrant who happens to stumble into a village, appearing as if out of the blue, just as a crisis has erupted. He tries to gain the confidence of villagers by telling tales and cracking jokes. He is an outsider without existential commitments. He is also a mime, telling people whatever they would like to hear — all according to the occasion. The trickster holds no real knowledge but practices a cunning intelligence. The trickster manages to impose himself, not because of his real qualities, nor by enabling the people around him, but by blurring distinctions. Rather than making clear the difference between truth and lie, the trickster thrives in ambivalence. While presenting himself as a solution to the crisis, he actually perpetuates insecurity by blurring boundaries and undermining the very sense of distinction and judgment. In fact, the trickster is not really interested in solving the crisis. His real interest lies in perpetuating conditions of confusion — his own habitat. The trickster is a demonic clown.

The sense of empowerment that tricksters manage to produce feels real enough for a while, but it evaporates as suddenly as the trickster entered the stage, and dissolves in nothingness. Before that happens, however, entire societies can drive themselves to destruction. The trickster is a professional in creating and escalating division up until violence breaks out, at which point he manages to represent himself as a savior. That is why in many cultures the trickster is defined as a 'second creator' — a

nullity, a nobody, a prankster who yet, under special circumstances, creates the world in his own image.

The trickster is a Jungian archetype. The trickster figure was brought into political science by the Hungarian sociologist, Agnes Horvath. Historical personalities rarely resemble universal archetypes down to detail. But Trump really comes strikingly close.

Trump is not a great orator. Linguists have shown that Trump repeats words a lot, and the most repeated word is "I," the fourth is "Trump" (clear signs of vanity); eight out of the top 13 words are one syllable with a few very simple two syllable words ("China" and "money"). Trump stirs emotions in trickster-like ways, enjoying the spectacle. A toxic mix of fun and anger is a defining characteristic of his campaign. "Is there anything more fun than a Trump rally?" is a question he regularly asks crowds, often as a protester is being dragged away. Not surprisingly, he has already threatened with riots, should his campaign not prevail.

Trump's statements as well as his political program are trickster-like down to detail. His program is slippery, undefinable. He will defy questions relating to political substance, and he will smoothly change position on key policy areas, cunningly pretending that such a change of opinion never took place. He is proud of his ability to charm women, but he seems unable to commit to lasting relations. His charming laughter and boyish innocence can in a split second freeze into a violent, sinister attack on the interlocutor. His laughter is that of a demonic clown.

Now that we have pinned down Trump and placed him in a more convincing typology, should that make us feel any better? Not really. Tricksters are always around. We should rather ask ourselves what it is in our society that invites a figure like Trump into the inner circles of power.

Trump can persuade people, because we are in a historical situation where the sentiments of fear, confusion, uncertainty and the loss of a sense of home are real enough. Trump is far from the only one of his kind. In fact, it seems as if current politics across the globe are increasingly influenced by trickster figures and trickster power.

To aggravate circumstance, this all recalls an anecdote told by Lewis Mumford, America's most brilliant thinker of the twentieth century. In November 1932, Mumford visited Europe, increasingly preoccupied with the rise of the Nazi movement. He went to see Karl Mannheim, Germany's most brilliant social scientist at the time. Mannheim told Mumford not to worry, as "Hitler was just a clown."

The worrying fact is that Mannheim was right. The only word he got wrong was "just." Political commentators and the audience at large need a new vocabulary to analyze the ways in which demonic clowns can gain power

in critical moments. Understanding the ways of the trickster provides the answer.

Keywords: [Democracy](#), [Politics](#)

Related Names: [Berlusconi \(Silvio\)](#), [Jung \(Carl\)](#), [Mussolini \(Benito\)](#), [Trump \(Donald\)](#), [Weber \(Max\)](#)

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2 thoughts on “Decoding Donald Trump: The Triumph of Trickster Politics”



Robert Earle

February 6, 2017 at 5:36 am

The article says we should ask what it is in our society that invites a figure like Trump into the inner circles of power. The answer is that as a symbol, as the personification of the trickster (one of the archetypal figures Carl Jung described), he activates that archetype which is, for the most part, unconscious in every human being throughout human history and across all cultures; and once a powerful unconscious content such as this is triggered, in societal circumstances which have already begun to get it stirring due to deep dissatisfaction with the status quo, rational decisions (such as voting) are unconsciously swayed by the trickster archetype, and no amount of evidence will sway many people from

rationalizing their decision. This is not too dissimilar a pattern from how a person in love will be blind to the deficiencies of their object of affection, although this operates unconsciously through other archetypes (anima and animus).

Not to say that such an irrational, instinctive/unconscious voting decision is necessarily bad. Sometimes situations are in a stagnant logjam—people are fed up with the status quo and there seems no way to change things. This could describe the political situation in the US, where few are happy with any of the candidates or any of the parties. The trickster personality can bring chaos, out of which a new order can develop, whether in our personal lives, business lives, or the political landscape.

For example, Trump’s conflicting statements also may be just what US foreign policy needs—to sow total confusion within other countries about exactly Trump might do in any situation. In the precious administrations, the US is totally predictable and chained by its political correctness—never a good idea when dealing with aggressive and amoral leaders and regimes not so similarly restricted.

Chaos may reign, both domestically and internationally for now, but something needs to shake up the current stagnation and impotence. We can only hope that the period of chaos will achieve dramatic changes without starting a nuclear war. If so, a better situation may emerge after Trump, as a result of Trump, whether it is a country which later unites against everything he stood for, or one in which a rational party platform and candidate emerges which takes from Trump the ideas

which deserve support (politically correct in the current climate or not) and rejects other policies as well as the man.

I personally intensely dislike Trump; however I feel that the policies of previous administrations, if continued, will lead to the loss of the culture we have carefully developed over hundreds of years, and which though flawed, because we are human beings, is the best step from which we can move forward to a better world. In doing so, we may have to protect our culture from dissolving into so many cultures (some modern, some primitive) that we have no culture at all. We need to recognize the reality that there is no way to be fair to every person and every culture without exposing our jugular to the very real evil that lies in the hearts of men, and is only held in check by the degree and nature of the culture which we've obtained so far. We must love, but we must also be prepared to fight if we wish our culture and what it can still become, to endure.

There is no good solution—there is only the best solution. We cannot be angels and do not wish to be devils, but the choices we make, if we and our culture are to survive, will require, in particular circumstances, the traits of one or the other.

We as a society recognize that we are frozen, stagnated, at war with ourselves. The status quo must be changed. The trickster, who sows chaos, is most likely the only way to break up that stasis. It may end badly or we may get through it to find a new beginning, unity, and effectiveness as a nation.

That is my hope, and whether most of the people who voted for Trump know it consciously or not, that is why they voted for him.

A final note. Although I dislike his personality, I don't think Trump is evil—he is just cursed with a personality and nature in which it is easy to see the flaws. I am sure that he feels he is doing what's right. But I don't believe we elected him to do what's right—we (knowingly or not) elected him to shake things up. The dice have been rolled, and the outcome is impossible to predict except in one way—things will change. If we can stay together during the change, we may yet emerge a better country as a result of that chaos as we pick up the pieces, wiser for the experience.

That is why the trickster/joker probably evolved in human beings as a critical unconscious archetype. Society sometimes needs someone to fill that role, to poke holes in the illusions that we have come to believe are inviolable fact, when in reality, they are truly ridiculous. To finally admit, to themselves and others, that sometimes the emperor has no clothes. It is not Trump who has no clothes, it is the previous administrations clothed in their political correctness and their need to demonstrate moral purity in spite of the harsh realities of the world.

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Mateo DF

August 28, 2018 at 12:52 am

Funny how some folks are so worried about the dangers of 'PC' and having the "Invading Hordes" sully our precious 'culture'... yet they can never seem to cite any *examples* of said menace (and who knew they were so 'sensitive' about it)?

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