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Psychoanalytic and Historical Perspective on the Leadership of Donald Trump: Narcissism and Marketing in an Age of Anxiety and Distrust. edited by Michael Maccoby and Ken Fuchsman (New York: Routledge 2020).

Reviewed by Neil McLaughlin

World events can sometimes make niche academic areas wildly popular and bring back from the dead scholarly traditions that have come to be seen as discredited. Just as it is a good time, in career terms, to be a conspiracy theory researcher and a specialist in infectious diseases it is clear that the once stigmatized area of psychohistory is going to be making a comeback. Donald Trump almost wrecked America and the pandemic continues to make this a difficult and even tragic period to be alive. Learning what we can from these challenging times must surely be one key goal for intellectuals. The insights coming from psychohistory and psychosocial analysis must be near the top of the list of issues to address anew in the wake of Trump.

The recently published collection of essays by psychologists, historians and sociologists “Psychoanalytic and Historical Perspective on the Leadership of Donald Trump: Narcissism and Marketing in an Age of Anxiety and Distrust” edited by Michael Maccoby and Ken Fuchsman offers timely and important insights into the psychology of Trump and Trumpism. It is packaged in ways that are likely to stimulate useful debate and new social science and historical research. Freud is no more dead than Trumpism is and with the Donald off our twitter feed and Biden safely in the White House, now is a good time to think big thoughts about the challenges ahead.

The major themes and most important ideas in this book are prefigured and developed in the first three chapters: influential social scientist Michael Maccoby’s essay on “marketing narcissistic leadership,” Ken Fuchsman and Molly Castelloe’s interview with the great psychoanalytic theorist of narcissism Otto Kernberg and Harvard historian of science Elizabeth Lumbeck’s careful analysis of the “allure of Trump narcissism” for his followers and base. Before November 2016 scholars who were doing psychohistories and using Freudian insights in social science research were on the defensive, forced to make the case for their ideas in an intellectual environment that was generally skeptical if not hostile and dismissive. Four years of watching Donald Trump in the White House and on Twitter has discredited the once widespread assumption that psychoanalytic concepts like narcissism are not relevant to hard-headed political analysis and are too speculative to be useful to social scientists and historians. Now the difficult work begins, refining clinical ideas and insights for historical and social science research without making the errors of over-reach and dogmatism that marred early psychohistory. Freud, Erik Erikson and Erich Fromm are all important places to start but this volume does a first-rate job of moving the discussion forward in dialogue with modern scholarship informed by post 1960s insights about gender and race.

Making psychoanalytic sense of the Trump phenomena first requires a nuanced understanding of the concept of “malignant narcissism” that has often been used by his most vocal critics to highlight the pathological elements of his personality. This volume has an extremely useful interview with Otto Kernberg, a central figure in the creation of the clinical concept of malignant narcissism and someone who has applied it to Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin and Saddam Hussein in important psychohistory scholarship. The editor of this book Ken Fuchsman is the President of the International Psychohistorical Association and he takes the lead in pushing Kernberg to carefully define malignant narcissism, describe its key components and address the question of whether it applies to Trump.

Certainly on the surface Kernberg’s description of an “attitude of grandiosity, superiority, entitlement, an attitude towards others of devaluation, contempt, depreciation of others” captures much about Donald Trump as does the “resentment” and “unconscious envy” often seen in malignant narcissists. Kernberg is skeptical, however, of attempts to diagnose Trump without more clinical data on his inner emotional life beyond the political show he puts on. Rightly concerned with mixing political critique with psychiatric analysis, Kernberg offers useful words of caution in these polarized times. Given Kernberg’s stature in the field and experience doing analysis of deeply pathological political characters, this chapter provides a useful counterbalance to the heated rhetoric we have seen in the public sphere over the past four year. This is even more important after the events of Jan 6 established beyond all doubt Trump’s willingness to mobilize fascist paramilitaries to stay in power.

Michael Maccoby also warns against using the categories of malignant narcissist to understand Trump, preferring to emphasize what German psychoanalyst and sociologist Erich Fromm called the “marketing character” as a central aspect of his personality and practice as a politician. Maccoby is an important early pioneer in the psychosocial study of work, having been influenced by both Erik Erikson and David Riesman at Harvard University in his student days. Maccoby developed his own psychoanalytic and social science research skills as research assistant to Fromm in Mexican City in the late 1950s and early 1960s and was the co-author of *Social Character in a Mexican Village* (Fromm and Maccoby 1970). Out of this research on how the social character of the inhabitants of a Mexican village both inhibited and could help facilitate new forms of development, Maccoby went on a highly successful career back in the United States as a best-selling author and consultant with business, governments and unions. Maccoby developed the concept of the productive narcissist in a book of that name (Maccoby 2003). Donald Trump even quoted Maccoby in *Think like a Billionaire* (2004) viewing himself as similar to the examples of Jeff Bezos, Steve Jobs and Ted Turner central to *The Productive Narcissist* (2003). Maccoby has a skin in this game of thinking about narcissism, politics and Trump and his chapter makes for valuable reading.

Maccoby gives us a concise overview of both Freudian theories of narcissism and Fromm’s Marxist influenced account of the ways in which personalities are shaped by the forces of alienation and celebrity culture in the modern world. This theoretical framework sets up nicely his own interpretation of Trump. Narcissism is not always malignant, and Maccoby makes a compelling case that Obama, for example, was a productive narcissist

who offered America a positive vision for better quality and affordable health care, a sustainable environment and a new relationship with the world. His narcissism was reflected in so often coming back to his story, his life and his feelings when articulating his politics and in writing 3 autobiographical books before he turns 60. Trump, on the other hand, does not have the qualities Maccoby suggests as defining productivity, for his “toxic brew of aesthetic, marking, and narcissistic needs that worked for him as entrepreneur and TV performer makes people distrust everything he says or tweets” (Maccoby 2020: 18). Maccoby is very clear that Trump’s authoritarian affinity for dictators, lack of compassion for the poor or for immigrant children, prioritizing loyalty over competence in his administration and his self-defeating paranoia made him a threat to the nation but he does not believe he was a malignant narcissist, in clinical terms. For Maccoby, attempts to understand Trump should focus less on violence and destructiveness as is inner drive and more on the ways he shapes himself to “gain the approval of others,” the ways in which his “grandiose bluff and buster are parts of an fragile narcissistic self-image defense that must be protected” and his constant need for adulation (Maccoby 2020: 16).

For all his liabilities as a human being, clearly Trump had personal qualities that helped build his political brand. Elizabeth Lunbeck’s chapter on “the allure of Trump’s narcissism,” thoughtfully frames the book’s attempt to explain the social psychology of “willing submission and unwavering loyalty” on display with his core followers. Unimpressed with much of the expert commentary and popular speculation on Trump’s personality, Elizabeth Lunbeck argues that it is not so important to ask, “is Trump a narcissist?” but rather “how does Trump mobilize his narcissism to connect with his followers?” (Lunbeck 2020: 36). People enjoy when Trump offers a “truthful hyperbole” about his greatness, he “projects and promises self-transcendence” (Lunbeck 2020: 38), is a “master at performing intimacy” and offers Americans “fantasies and primal emotions” that they have never seen before in a president and he is impressive in the “abandon with which he asserts his dominance and the ease with which he inhibits power” (Lunbeck 2020: 39). Liberals, for Lunbeck, can’t understand why so many millions support Trump given his anger and lies, but he is popular with so many *because* “of all his lies, anger, contempt toward losers, intolerance of dissent, and bombastic grandiosity” and flaunting standard norms of elite behaviour. Trump’s narcissism is thus a resource for his political success as much as an impediment (Lunbeck 2020).

With these three excellent chapters starting the conversation, the book succeeds because there is a diversity of political views and theoretical perspectives on offer, making it a real analysis of the issues not a simplistic attack on Trump. It is clear, of course, even more so after the Jan 6 storming of the US capital, that Trump’s emotional liabilities and unprincipled political views have damaged American democracy in serious ways. But with Trump bashing a national sport now in the United States among the liberal elite classes, this book does political debate in the United States a good service by not being hopelessly one-sided. The power of Paul Gottfried’s essay essentially on “why Trump is not a fascist” needs some revision after what we saw on Jan 6 but he is not wrong to raise questions about simplistic historical analogies and the propaganda on CNN and MSNBC. Sociologist Charles Heckscher takes a step back from Trump himself and thoughtfully suggest the populist revolt we are witnessing reflects “deep ills of industrial democracy” since the “legitimacy of the post war order that once integrated

virtually all the advanced economies is now severely weakened” (Heckscher 2020: 132). Ken Fuchsman is an excellent psychohistorian and his two essays add much to the volume, one on Trump’s competence and another on aspects of the broader American culture that made him possible. There is also a clinical piece on the disruptive elements of Trump’s narcissism, a thoughtful historical essay on American exceptionalism and a clarifying piece on usefulness of the concept “demagogue” applied to America’s 45th president.

One piece that stand out from the others is Robin Stern and Judith Logue’s “Gaslighting and Beyond.” This chapter is a thoughtful and insightful dialogue that begins with a summary and updating of Stern’s influential *The Gaslight Effect* (2007) to address Trump’s attempts to gaslight a nation. From there, prominent psychoanalyst Logue helps us further define gaslighting, addresses further depth psychological issues raised by Stern’s analysis, discusses examples of Trumpist gaslighting and connects the dialogue to themes discussed earlier in the book, particularly Fuchsman’s historical analysis of American culture. Sociologist Paige Sweet has attempted to develop “The Sociology of Gaslighting” in *The American Sociological Review* (2019: 84:5: 851-875) offering possibilities for broader dialogue across disciplines as we refine the now popular concept of gaslighting into something that has deeper theoretical and political depth. Stern and Logue take us closer to doing so by addressing the need to move beyond purely structural issues to confront psychosocial mechanisms, and it is a conversation worth entering.

This is an excellent book, overall, with two major limitations. All psychohistory risks overstepping their expertise and competence by talking psychological issues too far into the political. This book deals sensitively and carefully with the Goldwater rule that prohibits psychiatric diagnosis of politicians from afar and the case of Trump clearly cracked the boundary between the therapeutic and the public sphere of debate since he was so clearly unhinged. Nonetheless, these perspectives need to be put into more dialogue with mainstream political science and sociology, not an easy task partly because these disciplines are themselves far too resistant to depth psychological insights. This is a task for the future and one cannot blame the editors or the authors for not doing more but it is clearly a needed next step.

A second limitation of the book is a relative inattention to broader left critical psychoanalytic perspectives on our current crisis. Maccoby uses and updates Fromm’s market character analysis but the later part of the book reads a bit too much like arguments for some version of the Biden administration. Writing from Canada, I am pleased that American choose to show Trump the way out of the White House, albeit with a few bumps along the road at the end. Yet I remain skeptical that the same old liberalism offers what it will take to transform the economy and culture in ways that cut off the support base for radical right-wing populism. There are important works of critical Marxist influenced social science and feminist analysis such as Lynn Chancer’s *Sadomasochism and Everyday Life* (1992) that would offer different views on some of the political issues addressed in this book. Then again, the problem is not so much this book, but the general left inability to combine tough-minded political economy and political critique with insightful works of psychosocial critical theory. The later task requires addressing and this book is worth reading along the way.

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