

The Carnival King of Capital

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Introduction: The Carnival King

Brookings Institute writers Susan Hennessey and Benjamin Wittes complain that, while in the past, Presidents were expected to show certain standards of virtue and decency,

Donald Trump's life and candidacy were an ongoing rejection of civic virtue.... From the earliest days of his campaign, he declared war on the traditional presidency's expectations of behavior. He was flagrant in his immorality, boasting of marital infidelity and belittling political opponents with lewd insults. He had constructed his entire professional identity around gold-plated excess and luxury and the branding of self. As a candidate, he remained unabashed in his greed and personal ambition; even his namesake charitable foundation was revealed to be merely a shell for self-dealing. He bragged that finding ways to avoid paying taxes made him "smart"...He never spoke of the presidential office other than as an extension of himself (Hennessey and Wittes, 2020: 6-7).

This description suggests that Trump represents a demoralization and deinstitutionalization of the role of President. Trump brings a condition of anomie to the Presidency, and this anomie is closely related to the trait of narcissism that Trump exhibits in spades (Merton, 1938; Frank, 2018).

Hennessey and Wittes encapsulate what Trump signifies when they write that "The overriding message of Trump's life and of his campaign was that kindness is weakness, manners are for wimps, and the public interest is for suckers" (Hennessey and Wittes 2020: 6-7). The rejection of rules, codes, and standards not only expresses Trump's extreme narcissism (Frank, 2018: 143) but also performs an incivility that is meaningful and attractive to his followers. As Henry Giroux writes, "Trump... showcased and appropriated 'incivility' in his public appearances as a mark of solidarity with many of his white male adherents." By doing so, "he tapped into their resentment and transformed their misery into a racist, bigoted, misogynist, and ultra-nationalist appeal to the darkest forces of authoritarianism." Trump's incivility, enacting his claim to be an outsider and a disrupter, "was a winning strategy" and a key aspect of his charismatic authority for his supporters (Giroux, 2018: 145). Trump pits his charisma against the bureaucratic order of "the deep state" and what his associate Steve Bannon calls "the administrative state" (Grossberg, 2018: 136-137). The representatives of the deep state and administrative state such as Hennessey (who went from the NSA to CNN and a senior fellowship at the Democratic Party-aligned think-tank, the Brookings Institution) oblige by following their part in the script, defending institutional tradition and established order and decrying Trump's abnormality. Trump's appearance of breaking with

the normal operations of Washington DC is part of the appeal for his supporters. The very incivility that establishment commentators like Hennessey and Wittes bemoan is central to what his supporters find attractive in his political persona. According to Lawrence Grossberg, “His performance of incivility is a political statement” (Grossberg, 2018: 12).

Elizaveta Gaufman suggests that Trump’s performance of incivility is an expression of carnival and therein lies its political meaning and appeal. Carnival equalizes low culture and high culture; it is anti-elitist and populist, ridicules authority, and releases participants from everyday moral, legal, normative, sexual, and bodily repressions. “Carnival culture,” she argues, “can thus be seen as a... counterpoint to the notion of ‘civilizing’ (**Zivilisierung**) in post-medieval Europe that seemingly internalized ‘self-restraint’ and increased the threshold for shame” (Gaufman, 2018: 412-41, quoting 413). The carnivalesque quality of Trump’s performance is a key element in his populist appeal since it represents a claim to the position of the subaltern. According to Gaufman “The voice of the subaltern, as one emanating from the carnival square, and characterized by vulgar or coarse language, was particularly visible through Trump’s rhetoric in general, his campaign’s constant juxtapositions of the outsider versus the insider, and his #DrainTheSwamp narrative” (Gaufman, 2018: 421). In Trump, “carnival replaced normal politics” (Gaufman, 2018: 412). Trump’s carnival is no longer a temporary suspension of norms but has become permanent, in the process undermining the stable normative basis of democracy. She writes, “a permanent carnival leads to norm decay” (Gaufman, 2018: 420).

To the extent that Gaufman treats Trump as indicative of any broader processes, she suggests that he emerges out of and reflects an “age of misinformation,” with social media as the source of this (Gaufman, 2018: 411). This view closely aligns with the narrative of Hillary Clinton and the Democratic Party, which has blamed the internet (and Russian conspiracy) for harming Hillary’s popularity and election chances and which has used this as justification for promoting internet censorship by companies such as Facebook, Twitter, and Google (Damon, 2019). In this narrative, the defense of democracy against Trump’s authoritarianism is equivalent to the defense of the prior existing political order, which is presented as normal, and to the defense of the mediation of information by the traditional establishment filters and gatekeepers such as The New York Times. Gaufman’s critique of Trumpian carnival is the same as Hennessey and Wittes’ condemnation of his undermining the civility and virtue of the office of the Presidency. These critiques present Trump as an aberration from an otherwise existing normality. In their assumption of the possibility of normalcy, such critiques miss the true meaning of Trump.

Trump represents the permanency of the carnival in a more profound way than Gaufman acknowledges. Rather than an individual aberration, Trump embodies a more general condition in which the dominant order **is** the suspension and reversal of order. In Trump, the carnival is transformed from an escape from rule into a means of rule. Trump is both the inversion of authority, the Carnival King, and the very incarnation of the return in late capitalism of the aristocratic and monarchical principle and the autocratic rule of entrenched privilege. Ann Norton writes,

The power Trump knows is the power of kings.... Trump is the monarch of his business empire. He rules alone. He inherited wealth. His wealth, like that of more traditional kinglets, came from a family business founded in power over territory. He continues to hold territory, though his wealth may no longer flow primarily from that source. He intends to pass wealth and status on to the heirs of his body. His children are closest to the throne. His advisors serve at his pleasure. They are dismissed on a whim, often capriciously, and at his word alone: “You’re fired.” He values loyalty, but that loyalty runs only toward him. He expects

privileged access to the bodies of the women around him, the *droit de seigneur*, and he expects the women to regard these attentions as a distinction. There is no rule but his will (Norton 2017: 118).

Trump as Carnival King ridicules and scorns the normative order claimed to be represented and defended by the bureaucratic and administrative state. Trump as king represents pre-modern personalism and patronage. For example, Hans Bakker observes, “Trump himself is a kind of neo-patrimonial figure and there seem to be elements of prebendalism in his selection of members of his inner circle” (Bakker, 2017: 119).

As a monarchical and charismatic fascist autocrat, Trump asserts absolute license and refuses all boundaries to his will and action. This was evident in his boast during his campaign that he could “stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody” and it would not dent his support and in his conversation, caught on film, in which he claims that women will allow him to do whatever he wants with them: “It’s like a magnet. Just kiss. I don’t even wait. And when you’re a star, they let you do it. You can do anything. Grab them by the pussy. You can do anything” (Trump, quoted in Soave, 2016).

This conveys not only his misogyny but also his monarchical, and also narcissistic and sociopathic, claim to absolute license, his rejection of any limits on his action or his ability to act out his desires. Philip Zimbardo and Rosemary Sword observe that Trump’s “extreme present hedonism;... narcissism; and... bullying behavior... overlap... to create an impulsive, immature, incompetent person who, when in the position of ultimate power, easily slides into the role of tyrant, complete with family sitting at his proverbial ‘ruling table’” (Zimbardo and Sword, 2017: 44). As an impeached President who continues to rule, and indeed emerged from the impeachment debacle even stronger, Trump has some justification for feeling himself to be above the law, which undoubtedly further inflates his narcissistic grandiosity (Frank, 2018: 146).

Trump is a grotesque and obscene tyrant, a real-life King Ubu (Simic, 2017). He embodies what Slavoj Žižek calls the “obscene superego” (Žižek, 2006: 55). Trump models, permits, and challenges his followers to reflect back aggressive masculinity. He goads them, are you a winner or a loser? Are you potent, or are you castrated? In October 2018, a man who groped a woman on an airline flight told arresting officers that “the president of the United States says it’s OK to grab women by their private parts” (KHOU, 2018). This man understood the President to be communicating that women are symbolic objects, possession of which is the badge of male status. However, he appears not to have understood the limited scope of status: “**when you’re a star** they let you do it” (emphasis added). Trump’s message was, implicitly, “I can, you can’t. I am a winner, you are a loser.” Trump, as a star, and king, was asserting his being above conventional rules. The man arrested, in his own delusional narcissism and infantile identification with Trump, imagined that he too was Trump (because also male), that he too could do anything.

Stardom or celebrity is, in many ways, the contemporary equivalent of the aristocracy. Celebrities enact conspicuous consumption, and embody, as Guy Debord argued, a fantasy of total leisure (Debord, 1987, thesis 60). This means freedom from necessity, and therefore freedom from the banal, conventional, and normal constraints of everyday life. The celebrity occupies a world that transcends everyday life. So as he violates rules and overturns order, Trump does so from a privileged rather than subaltern position. Trump does not **subvert** the rules but places himself **above** them. Trump embodies the merger of what Debord calls the “diffuse spectacle” of market capitalism with the “concentrated spectacle” of dictatorship; and, therefore, what Debord called the “integrated spectacle” (Debord, 1987: thesis 63; Debord, 1991: thesis V;

cf. Kellner, 2017b). Debord writes of the demand in authoritarian regimes (for example under Stalin, Mao, and Hitler) to identify with the ruler, such that “Everyone must identify magically with this absolute celebrity or disappear” (Debord, 1987: thesis 64). This is literally the case under such regimes, for example in North Korea where rituals of identification with the ruling dynasty are required under the threat of labor camp and death. For Trump’s followers, it is true in a different way. Magical identification is motivated by the need to cling onto (the coattails of) power, and therefore significance, so as not to disappear into the powerlessness and chaos of capitalist society’s alienated reality (cf. Lundskow, 2012; Langman, 2012: 63-64).

Trump’s paradoxical carnival of power and privilege arises from and expresses the prevailing capitalist economic and class forces. Far from carnival overturning normality, Slavoj Žižek writes that in “today’s ‘late capitalism,’ it is ‘normal’ life itself which, in a way, gets ‘carnivalized,’ with its constant self-revolutionizing, with its reversals, crises, reinventions... [C]ontemporary capitalism has already overcome the logic of totalizing normality and adopted the logic of the erratic excess” (Žižek, 2017: 25). While “counter-cultural carnality” has been adopted by anti-capitalist protesters, the more protest adopts a subcultural style, the more it runs the risk of commercial cooptation (Miles, 2014: 83-84, quoting 83). One cannot counterpose carnivalesque disorder to a status quo normative order, because the market constantly disrupts and renders temporary any existing normality. Trump as Carnival King reflects Žižek’s observation that “It is the reign of today’s global capitalism which is the true Lord of Misrule” (Žižek, 2017: quoting 26, see also 20). Cometh the hour, cometh the man.

Trump is a particularly American type of carnivalesque: the carnival barker (Kellner, 2016: 22). Investigative journalist David Cay Johnston describes him as a “modern P. T. Barnum selling tickets to a modern variation of the Feejee mermaid” (Johnston, 2017). The carnival’s inversion of the normal is here sold as a commodity. To truly understand Trump as a social phenomenon is to perceive Trump as a mirror reflection of a mirror reflection. Trump reflects back and uses the narcissism of a decadent bourgeois class that, propagated through mass media and advertising in a context in which global financialized capital has corroded social bonds, increasingly diffuses through, and pervades, the broader culture. The carnival attraction to which Trump is selling tickets is none other than himself. He is his own brand (Johnson, 2017: 147). The expansion of his ego is the expansion of his brand, and vice versa. It seems that his running for President may have been a guerilla-marketing use of mass media to add value to his brand. The charismatic personalism of his style of Presidency also follows from this: the Presidency is merged with his business empire, with his brand, and with himself. *L’état, c’est moi*. And indeed, the Trump administration’s lawyers have followed the Bush administration in pushing the neo-monarchical theory of the unitary executive, effectively placing the President above the law. Johnston writes, “Trump would disrupt the process, not for the benefit of the United States of America, but for Trump” (Johnston, 2017: ix). The presidency becomes an extension, validation, and reinforcement of Trump’s narcissism. Institutional structures (such as the separation of powers), law, and the public interest give way to nepotistic, personalist, autocracy operating without a plan in an impulsive, arbitrary, and chaotic way. State power and public life become correspondingly dysregulated.

Trump, Narcissism, and Carnivalized Consumerism

Trump’s carnival reflects the cultural logic of post-Fordist or postmodern capitalism. How this is so is best understood in terms of Lauren Langman and Maureen Ryan’s concept of “the

carnival character” as the prevailing form of social character in late capitalism. Langman and Ryan (2009) posit this as the successor to Erich Fromm’s mid-twentieth century “marketing character.” While the marketing character has by no means disappeared, there has been a further deepening of the commodification of selfhood. The self has been increasingly fragmented by the shifting and proliferating signs of consumer culture and by the declining stability of employment and autonomy at work (Langman and Ryan, 2009: 476-477). As a result, people increasingly construct their identities in the realm of consumerism and in an increasingly compressed and fragmented non-work time. Personal identity and sense of self is increasingly invested in “privatist hedonism” as an escape from pressurized, disempowered, and precarious post-Fordist work (Langman and Ryan, 2009: 477). In contrast with the mid-twentieth-century marketing character whose self-presentation was largely conformist with a degree of sanctioned deviance within a developing consumer culture, the carnival character reflects a further stage in consumerism’s saturation of culture and its profound influence on the shaping of selfhood.

While post-Fordist work patterns and conditions made work a less meaningful basis for identification, post-Fordist variegated consumption, catering to a myriad of niche markets, offers opportunities for the construction of what Langman has called “shopping mall selfhood” in which “subjectivity... exists as an episodic series of moments of consumer-based micro-spectacles devoid of a central organizing principle” (Langman and Ryan, 2009: 477; Langman, 1992). The carnival character is a further development of this fragmentation of self within the kaleidoscopic hall of mirrors of the consumer spectacle. In contrast with Fordist mass consumption, the emphasis in post-Fordist or postmodern consumer culture is on the differentiation of self from the mass and so social conformity is discredited in favor of the narcissistic affirmation of the uniqueness of individual self. The commodification and marketing of non-conformity also expresses how consumer identities are constructed in opposition to the repressive codes of capitalist work. As a result, the cultural and social-psychological shift from the marketing character to the carnival character is heralded by an increasing valorization of transgression. Langman and Ryan write, “If the ‘marketing character’ sold him/her self as a commodity, the carnival character creates his/her identity through seemingly transgressive consumption in an ever-changing plurality of fusions and/or contradictory appearances” (Langman and Ryan, 2009: 472). But this transgression does not undermine or even oppose the dominant social order: “the carnival character may well find agency and fulfillment, but any ‘repudiation’ of dominant power structures of capital in its now global moment is at best a specious one” (Langman and Ryan, 2009: 490). Just as Bakhtin argued that medieval carnival functioned as a sanctioned outlet for social tensions, which ultimately served to maintain feudal order, Langman and Ryan suggest that the privatized transgressions of the carnival character reinforce post-Fordist capitalism by being escapist, depoliticizing and inextricably tied to consumerism which markets “the transgressive, the vulgar and hedonistic” (Langman and Ryan, 2009: 490). In this context, transgression no longer represents a challenge to capitalism, but rather supports it: “the carnivalesque as political protest has largely waned in the face of a transgressive popular culture-mediated product.” As a result, “carnivalization as a cultural form serves a hegemonic function” (Langman and Ryan, 2009: 480).

What Langman and Ryan call consumerism’s “carnivalized moment” (Langman and Ryan, 2009: 480) reflects a transition away from the form of mass consumerism that characterized the early postwar Fordist “bureaucratic society of controlled consumption” (Lefebvre, 1971: 68-109). Anthony Giddens emphasizes that the routinized practices and expectations of (Fordist) everyday life formed the basis of a shared social fabric and solution to ontological security in a modern

world which had weakened tradition (Giddens, 1981: 194; Giddens, 1985: 194-197; Thorpe and Jacobson, 2013; Thorpe, 2020). Especially with the development of mass consumerism in the context of Fordist economic growth in the first two decades after World War Two, a modest version of ‘the American dream’ became achievable for the mass of the population, including the working class, through mass consumption. A mass consumerist everyday life underpinned the political legitimacy of the state, in what Lizabeth Cohen calls a “consumers’ republic” (Cohen, 2003; Langman and Ryan, 2009: 476). Mass consumerism as a principle of social integration was evident in Cold War “sociological propaganda” representing “the American way of life” as, according to Randal Marlin, was evident in “American films of the 1950s, with their stay-at-home mothers and businessmen fathers” (Marlin, 2002: 37). The shift from the marketing character to the carnival character corresponds to a shift from conformity to transgression, and to the growth of plutonomy that undermines the capacity for consumerism to create a shared culture. Citigroup reported on this development: “In a plutonomy there is no such animal as ‘the U.S. consumer’... There are rich consumers... [and] [t]here are the rest” (Kapur, Macleod, and Singh, 2005: 2).

In this context of stark inequality, competitive conspicuous consumption becomes an imperative to distinguish oneself from “the rest.” Consumerism is no longer the middle-class suburban conformism of “keeping up with the Joneses” but becomes the impossibility of “keeping up with Kardashians” (the title of a reality-television show about the super-rich family).¹ During the Great Depression, Robert K. Merton already perceived the dysregulating effects on society of the competitive possessive individualism of the American dream: “In societies such as our own, then, the pressure of prestige-bearing success tends to eliminate the effective social constraint over means employed to this end” (Merton, 1938: 681). Merton perceived the tendency in American society for the dominant value of material success to become an end in itself, for the achievement of which any means are seen as justified. He wrote, “The extreme emphasis upon the accumulation of wealth as a symbol of success in our own society militates against the completely effective control of institutionally regulated modes of acquiring a fortune. Fraud, corruption, vice, crime, in short, the entire catalogue of proscribed behavior, becomes increasingly common... ” He pointed to the “process whereby the exaltation of the end generates a **literal demoralization**, i.e., deinstitutionalization of the means” (Merton, 1938: 675, emphasis in original; cf. Fevre, 2000). But what Merton regarded as institutional and cultural **strain** is a **contradiction** that has become under post-Fordist, financialized plutonomy a gaping chasm between a mass consumer culture which prescribes values for the whole society and the inequality that makes “success” a value available only to the few. Crucially, Merton pointed to the way in which anomie threatened to undermine the supports of ontological security in routinized everyday life:

Insofar as one of the most general functions of social organization is to provide a basis for calculability and regularity of behavior, it is increasingly limited in effectiveness as these elements of the structure become dissociated. At the extreme, predictability virtually disappears and what may be properly termed cultural chaos or anomie intervenes (Merton, 1938: 682).

What Merton analyzed as institutional and cultural strain needs to be understood as structural contradiction systemically produced by capitalism, bound up with inequality and sharpened by globalization and financialization.

The tendency toward permanent anomie is not just American but common to all western societies and much of the world as a result of globalization (Passos, 2000). In their ethnography of the consumerist motivations of petty criminals in de-industrialized English towns and cities,

cultural criminologists Steve Hall, Simon Winlow and Craig Ancrum note that “In the vast majority of cases the lives of our respondents were dominated by the constant scramble to accumulate and display, and many had become enchanted by an idealized image of themselves that bore no relationship at all to the actual material and socio-political realities of their lives” (Hall, Winlow and Ancrum, 2008: 30). What drives their desperate attempts to grasp the symbolic consumerist accouterments of social status and their compulsive hedonism is a fundamental fragility of self in a social context lacking support for self-identity other than consumerism. The young men interviewed by Hall, Winlow, and Ancrum experience the social world they inhabit in their de-industrialized ‘estates,’ or housing projects, as one without solidarity, in which everyone is out for themselves and no one can be trusted. For them, “To be happy was to indulge, to buy, to squander, to be released from the normal restrictions of everyday life.” The possibility of escape from drab non-identity was embodied in commodities sought after as “reflective mirrors of identity and distinction.... Merged imagos and ego ideals in a Lacanian fundamental narcissistic fantasy, which act as a means of temporarily confirming existence and identity” (Hall, Winlow and Ancrum, 2008: 49). The quest for status and identity does not take the path of rationalized work, which in a post-industrial context of extreme inequality, cultural saturation with expansive consumerist fantasy, and precarious low-paid ‘McJobs,’ ceases to offer a realistic path to socially recognized and rewarded success. Instead, their perspective is short-term, with rational calculation replaced with belief in chance (Hall, Winlow and Ancrum, 2008: 24-25, 53-58). But they would not hesitate to use violence to gain access to these fantasy objects and lifestyles. These young men instantiate a much more general combination of the decline of work as the basis for community and identity and the turn to transgressive, hedonistic consumption as the source of identity.

Consumerist identity is forged in the narcissistic search to differentiate oneself from the mass or the ‘herd’ that represents non-identity, the loss of self in undifferentiated being. The drive of consumerism is no longer to fit into a middle-class standard, but to stand out as unique in order to have an identity. Contemporary society traps the individual in a condition of infantile narcissism in which the individual escapes from “terror of helplessness and insignificance” through identification with consumerist symbols (Hall Winlow and Ancrum, 2008: 173). Hall, Winlow, and Ancrum write,

The primary urge of the premature and helpless infant to preserve its physical integrity and narcissistic relationship to the other has been prolonged throughout the life-course and harnessed to the consumer economy... The emphasis on hedonism as the principal reward for work and the achievement of a socially distinct identity has over the past fifty years or so created a new form of super-ego, radically different from the one that prevailed in the traditional Symbolic Order, a super-ego that heaps guilt on the subject’s failure to enjoy rather than her failure to abstain (Hall, Winlow and Ancrum, 2008: 209).

Weber interpreted Calvinist salvation anxiety as assuaged through making a fetish of self-control, work, and the accumulation of material wealth as signifiers of elect status and the certainty of salvation. In this way, the capitalist spirit made work and repression the basis of ontological security. But Weber suggested that, in a paradoxical turn, the signifier takes over from the signified so that the accumulation of material wealth requires no further justification. What Hall, Winlow, and Ancrum are portraying is the total inversion of the Calvinist solution to salvation anxiety, such that hedonistic and transgressive conspicuous consumption becomes the mark of distinction that functions to suppress inner dread. Life becomes present-oriented, lacking rational orientation toward the future or any connection to the past, becoming instead a

string of disconnected moments of hedonistic excess that serve as a temporary escape (see also Langman and Ryan, 2009: 481-482). Unlike the hoarding of the Protestant entrepreneur, there is in the social world that Hall, Winlow, and Ancrum depict, no possibility of rational accumulation as the path to the ends sought. As a result, there is a marked lack of economic realism. These young men wait for their lucky break and feel that they are at the mercy of fate (Hall, Winlow and Ancrum, 2008: 48, 79-80).

This derivation of distinction from conspicuous consumption and from transgression, signifying transcendence of the mundane order, appears as a **regression** from a rationalized modernity to a pre-Reformation feudalism and even further to the roots of feudalism in a barbarian culture of war and conquest. In sharp contrast with the Weberian “spirit of capitalism” centered in the self-discipline of a secularized Protestant work ethic, conspicuous consumption derives from the existence of a “leisure class,” with a predatory relationship to productive society, that is distinguished by its exemption from toil and that asserts its superiority in contempt for work and in conspicuous transcendence of the realm of necessity (Veblen, 1979). Hall, Winlow, and Ancrum refer to Thorstein Veblen’s theory of the conspicuous consumption of the leisure class as barbarian and aristocratic in origin. In this way, they suggest that conspicuous consumption is indicative and expressive of decivilizing tendencies in Norbert Elias’s sense, or the breakdown of what Hall, Winlow and Ancrum more dialectically call modernity’s “pseudo-pacification process” (Hall, Winlow, and Ancrum, 2008: 175, 211-217; Hall, 2000, 2007; Hall and Winlow, 2004; Ellis, 2019; Vaughan, 2003). The social prominence of conspicuous consumption, i.e., the visibility of “the practice of acquiring primarily for the purpose of display,” works to disrupt “the fragile project of political solidarity” (Hall, Winlow, and Ancrum, 2005: 7). Indeed, the decline of a literate civil society, in an electronically-mediated consumer culture, may also be associated with a decivilizing process since it was civil society that, as Langman writes, “allowed the emergence of a ‘civilized’ political culture, distinct from, if not opposed to, dynastic regimes” (Langman, 2003: 176, see also 180-182, 186-187).

The idea of postmodernity as blending with pre-modernity in a retreat or escape from modernity is also implied by the return of the medieval phenomenon of carnival as a central feature of postmodern culture and formation of self. Langman and Ryan argue that the postmodern can be characterized as a “‘cyberfeudalism,’ a fusion of the most advanced technologies with the pre-modern carnival” (Langman and Ryan, 2009: 478; see also Braun, 2017; Grossberg, 2018: 113-142). Hall, Winlow, and Ancrum warn about the corrosive effect on solidarity of the spread throughout society of the barbarian values of the leisure class:

[T]he new narcissistic aristocrats of the boardrooms and those of the sink estates revel in their ability to simply take what they need in the way of symbolic objects that can establish their distinguished identities without the ignominy of having to labour like those in the ‘bovine herd’ they imagine to exist below them (Hall, Winlow and Ancrum, 2008: 206).

The takeover of the culture by “the cult of barbarism – acquisitive individualism, narcissism and social distinction” has meant the end of the solidarity project of social democracy in what Hall, Winlow, and Ancrum call “the post-productivist, post-social capitalist economy” (Hall, Winlow and Ancrum, 2008: 198-204, quoting 204). This cultural shift corresponds with the effects of financialization in creating turbulence and unpredictability at all levels of life and in producing inequality not seen since at least before the reforms of the New Deal era, seeing the return of entrenched hereditary privilege (Picketty, 2014: 377-429; Picketty, 2020: 648-716; Bullough, 2019).

While being a billionaire embodiment of the corrupt new aristocracy, Trump also manages to be the Carnival King who mocks and symbolically challenges the powerful ‘insiders.’ It is telling that one path through which Trump came to public prominence was through decades of involvement as an investor in and promoter of the theatrical spectacle of WWF/WWE Wrestling. Trump’s political carnival, for example, the way he whips up the emotions of the crowd at his campaign rallies, draws on the world of professional wrestling, even, according to Chauncey Devega, down to his “speech and cadence” (Devega, 2017; Nessen, 2016). According to Heather Bandenburg, “Trump has always been essentially a wrestling gimmick embodied in a real life person” (Bandenburg, 2016). Chris Hedges has written about professional wrestling as “stylized rituals” in which the caricatured personae adopted by the wrestlers dramatize, in fantastic parable form, the struggles of the working-class predominantly male audience. According to Hedges, in these matches, “The burden of real problems is transformed into fodder for a high-energy pantomime” (Hedges, 2009: 5). Trump is a character in this pantomime. His persona, as Devega insightfully observes, is drawn from “the heel” character in a wrestling bout who is the villain facing the heroic and sympathetic “face” (Devega, 2017). In contrast to the honorable “face”:

The heel will lie, cheat, dissemble, and do anything to win a match... Ultimately, he only cares about obtaining the object of his personal desire—this could be money, power, sex, glory, fame, the championship, or in some cases, just playing the role of a chaotic spoiler who lives to humiliate and brutalize the “good guys” (Devega, 2017).

Trump’s political persona is the anti-hero. As the “heel” he exposes and humiliates the “good guys” of the Washington DC establishment, cultural elites, and the liberals, thereby channeling the **ressentiment** of, especially, lower-middle-class whites who feel left behind both economically and culturally (Langman and Lundskow, 2012; Langman, 2018; Lundskow, 2019; Kellner, 2017a). For Americans who cannot help but experience the disjunction between the rhetoric of both party establishments and the reality of their lives, “the heel” is exactly who they want to expose and ridicule the establishment’s phony virtue. Trump makes no claim to virtue and this gives him an aura of authenticity. This could be seen during the Republican primary campaign in 2015 when he was asked about a remark he had made during an interview that “When you give, they do whatever the hell you want them to do.” Trump replied, “You’d better believe it. If I ask them, if I need them, you know, most of the people on this stage I’ve given to, just so you understand, a lot of money.” He continued, “I was a businessman. I give to everybody. When they call, I give. And you know what? When I need something from them, two years later, three years later, I call them, and they are there for me.” He added, “And that’s a broken system” (quoted in Fang, 2015). Trump appears at least candid as opposed to the craven politicians who accept such legalized bribes and, as the powerful businessman, becomes in this scenario a figure of admiration and identification while his rivals are belittled as underlings. Trump as “heel” is both the carnivalesque challenge to the dominant order who inverts its codes and a figure of power who fundamentally embodies the dominant order. In this way, Trump is both Carnival King, who mocks and inverts power, and a real king. Or, as Heather Bandenburg puts it in her article on Trump’s wrestling background, “he has moved from pretend monster to real monster” (Bandenburg, 2016).

Trump’s malignant narcissism means that he truly is “a monster,” as Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez called him for his threatening the war crime of bombing Iranian cultural sites (quoted in Johnson, 2020; cf. Malkin, 2018: 58-59 Dodes, 2017; Gartner, 2017: 94-95). Erich Fromm, who coined the clinical term, emphasized the sadism and destructiveness of the malignant narcissist, who seeks

to preserve the self by crushing and even completely destroying what is outside the self. Fromm wrote of narcissism as a psychological solution to the terror of separateness:

He can solve the problem by relating exclusively to himself (narcissism); then he becomes the world, and loves the world by “loving” himself... A last and malignant form of solving the problem (usually blended with extreme narcissism) is the craving to destroy all others. If no one exists outside of me, I need not fear others, nor need I relate myself to them. By destroying the world I am saved from being crushed by it (Fromm 1973: 262).

Malignant narcissism, and its corollary in necrophilia, is evident in Trump’s threats to use nuclear weapons, bringing “fire and fury” in order to “totally destroy” North Korea or his statement that he could, if he wished, “kill 10 million people” in order to quickly win the Afghanistan war (Perera and Jones, 2019; cf. Fromm, 1973; Thorpe, 2016; Kellner, 2016; Kellner, 2018; Featherstone, 2016). Trump’s malignant narcissistic fantasy that he is stronger and more powerful than anything else in the world, and has the power to destroy everything outside himself, is dangerously realized by his position as President, not only because he has the nuclear launch codes, but also when he imagines that he can as if by force of will, hold back the tide of coronavirus from America’s shores. The pretend monster is a real monster.

The Trump presidency is a phenomenon of carnivalization. This does not necessarily mean that Trump himself is an instantiation of the carnival character. Fromm’s character orientations are collective ideal types, not diagnostic categories for an individual. But one can point to affinities between these collective categories and categories of individual character. There is a correspondence between the carnival character and narcissism. Langman and Ryan write, “If the ‘marketing orientation’ was the social expression of aggressive phallic character, the ‘carnival character’ is underpinned by narcissistic pathologies” (Langman and Ryan, 2009: 480). It is narcissism, as will be discussed below, that is expressed in extreme and indeed malignant form in Trump. Trump also exhibits features of the marketing character: “The phallic aggressive personality is the person who expects to sell things to others, beginning with his/her self.” And he also has an affinity with aspects of the hoarding orientation that was associated with Freud’s conception of anal sadistic character (cf. Langman and Ryan, 2009: 475). Nevertheless, psychologists writing about Trump are in general agreement that extreme narcissism is the most profound and overarching characteristic of his psyche and character (Lee ed., 2017; Frank, 2018). One can, I think, understand Trump’s narcissism as the core trait that motivates a phallic-aggressive orientation, persona, and behaviors and anal-sadistic passions and behaviors. The deep psychological need that these behaviors and self-presentations fulfill are narcissistic.

Fromm was prescient about the current “narcissism epidemic” when he wrote “If the modern age has been rightly called the age of anxiety, it is primarily because of this anxiety engendered by the lack of self” (Twenge and Campbell, 2009; Fromm, 1955: 204; cf. Derber, 2000). Trump shares with his followers’ intense anxiety as a result of the lack of support for the formation of coherent selfhood. Psychoanalyst Justin A. Frank relays a description of Trump, in the White House, watching re-runs of himself in the reality-television show that was instrumental in establishing his public persona, *The Apprentice*. Frank writes, “Trump still needs the comfort of seeing himself made whole by a televised second skin, even if it reminds him that he doesn’t feel that wholeness inside” (Frank, 2018: 150). Trump’s solution, the construction of ‘Donald Trump,’ the persona as a brand, then becomes the solution of his followers, through projective identification.

The carnival offered by Trump's rallies and his political persona offers an outlet for many who appear on the surface to be antithetical to the carnival character, denouncing and pitting themselves against the prevailing hedonism. Much of his support comes from sections of society with authoritarian personalities (for example, right-wing evangelicals) that feel threatened and displaced by the proliferating fluidity of values and cultural forms in carnivalized late capitalism (cf. Langman and Ryan, 2009: 485, 488). In that way, Trump provides a kind of reactionary counter-carnival (cf. Lundskow, 2012). This inverted carnival fulfills the function that runs through all carnival: "The many hitherto denied pleasures of the obscene, the grotesque and vulgar are simulated resistances that in fact neutralize real contestation" (Langman and Ryan, 2009: 483). The pleasures of the perverse and obscene are very closely connected with authoritarianism, in a return of the repressed, which takes anal-sadistic and destructive form. It is likely that the evangelicals, whose leading figures are television hucksters and confidence men rather similar to Trump, and whose authoritarianism is underpinned by sadomasochistic and destructive passions, are attracted very much by the cruelty and destructiveness of their "imperfect vessel" (Stewart, 2018; cf. Blumenthal, 2009: 63-64; Hedges, 2007). Trump's authoritarian carnival fulfills psychological needs for his followers through their narcissistic projective identification with him and his anger and cruelty are very much part of his appeal (Smith and Hanley, 2018; Lundskow, 2012: 127-132).

Group Narcissism and Reality-Denial

The essential affinity between Trump and carnival capitalism lies in the escape from reality. Carnival fulfills the same function that Fromm identified in authoritarianism and conformity. It offers an escape from frightening feelings of powerlessness, insignificance, lostness, and chaos. Langman and Ryan argue that the postmodern carnival is a psychic retreat from an alienated public world into privatized hedonism (Langman and Ryan, 2009: 474, 477, 482-484). Trump's predominant psychological characteristic, narcissism, is also a psychic retreat from reality (Zimbardo and Sword, 2017: 26; Malkin, 2017: 56, 60, 62). A wide range of psychoanalytic thinkers have described narcissism as a defensive reaction. Fromm argues that narcissism is a form of escape from the existential dread of separateness and its resultant feelings of powerlessness and lostness (Fromm, 1973: 200-203; Fromm, 1964: 62-68; cf. Steiner, 1993: 43). What is known about Trump's childhood gives ample cause for Trump to develop narcissistic defenses. He has done so in extreme fashion to the point where it may well be called delusional (Frank, 2018: 143-147, 226-229).

Whereas the carnival character constructs their escape from reality in individualized and privatized leisure activities and consumption and in micro-communities or neo-tribes gathering through those activities, Trump has the wealth and power to inflate his narcissistic fantasy to global proportions, in the process carnivalizing the public sphere. Whereas for most people postmodern privatized carnival allows their narcissistic defenses, their grandiosity, illusion of being special, illusion of omnipotence, and magical thinking only in the private sphere of leisure, consumerism, or the desublimated other-world of cyberspace (cf. Thorpe, 2016; Langman, 2003: 184-185), Trump is able to realize his delusions of grandeur. The culture of consumerism and electronic media, which erodes self-control and "culturally based shame and bodily disciplines" (Langman, 2003: 185), is a culture in which a narcissistic figure like Trump can flourish.²

Trump is able to use his wealth and power to project his fantasy world into reality, colonizing reality. According to Lifton, “Trump creates his own extreme manipulation of reality. He insists that his spokesmen defend his false reality as normal. He then expects the rest of society to accept it – despite the lack of any evidence.” Trump’s reality is no less a fantasy for the fact that it has colonized reality. What results is “malignant normality” (Lifton, quoted in Sheehy, 2017: 79).

Trump has said that in his real estate business, “I play to people’s fantasies” (quoted in McAdam, 2020: 31; Singer, 2017: 293). And those to whose fantasies he caters, who are keen to mirror and identify with Trump, reflect his fantasy back to him. Trump’s own narcissistic grandiosity is thereby reinforced and further energized (cf. Malkin, 2017: 59). In this way, “Trump literally and figuratively speaks the language of the Republican base and is a hero (while simultaneously being a villain for the rest of the American public) whom they can live through by proxy” (Devega, 2017). As psychiatrist Thomas Singer writes,

It seems clear that Trump’s narcissism and his attacks on political correctness dovetail with deep needs in a significant portion of the American population to enhance their dwindling sense of place in America and of America’s place in the world. Trump’s narcissism can be seen as a perfect compensatory mirror for the narcissistic needs and injuries of those who support him (Singer, 2017: 284).

The narcissistic wounds suffered by Trump’s followers are integrally related to the undermining by globalization of group-narcissistic nationalist fantasy.

Studs Terkel quotes a taxi driver in St. Louis defending the Vietnam War by saying, “We can’t be a pitiful, helpless giant. We gotta show ’em we’re number one.” Terkel asked him, “Are you number one?,” to which the taxi driver replied, “I’m number nuthin’” (Terkel, 2007: 32; also quoted in Fussell, 1992: 48). Ones and zeroes. To be, or not to be. To be nothing is death (cf. Becker, 1977). To feel oneself to be nothing is to have no narcissistic protection from chaos and death, to exist in terror (cf. Salzman, 2001). Fromm has described the compensatory psychological mechanism of group narcissism as operating with the (usually unconscious) thought “I am a part of the most wonderful group in the world. I, who in reality am a worm, become a giant through belonging to the group” (Fromm, 1973: 204; see also Fromm, 1964: 78-80). Group narcissism is a protective fantasy that supports the (to a degree, necessary) protective coating of narcissism around the individual. But the less connected to a social whole, the less secure is the individual in both their sense of material security and in the security and shelter that solidarity provides. The more fearful of exposure to the universe (“to the elements”), the more the individual needs to build up that protective coating. The fewer real supports for ontological security in the social world they inhabit daily, the more they need an artificial substitute.

Drugs and alcohol are a major palliative, fueling America’s declining average life expectancy, a crucial indicator of the wellbeing of the society, through what epidemiologists have termed “deaths of despair.” But another method is to find an ideal transcendental support for ontological security in fantasy. Religion is a well-established method of reality-denial (Freud, 2011; Berger, 1969; Varki and Brower, 2013). This ethereal opium thrives in the United States. Fundamentalist and evangelical Christianity, especially, is a major market in palliatives for social breakdown and individual despair (Hedges, 2018: 50-51; Blumental, 2009). However, especially in a predominantly Protestant country, and with the spread of new religions and a kind of spiritual consumerism, as well as the rise of agnosticism and atheism, the sacred canopy is not broad enough to encompass ‘society,’ despite the efforts of evangelical Christian fascists to subordinate society to their religious doctrine (Hedges, 2006). For that reason, the most powerful form of group narcissism, upon

which the individual can draw in support of ontological security, is nationalism. In modernity, nationalism is the form of group narcissism that corresponds with ‘society.’ There is a very close relationship between the nation-state and the genesis of the modern form of ‘society’ (Giddens, 1981, 1985; Gellner, 1983; Langman, 2003: 168, 177-178). It was through the nation-state that the bourgeoisie was able to create a solution to the Hobbesian problem of order that bourgeois relations themselves posed. Nationalism remains the fundamental bourgeois solution to the problem of order. Through what criminologists have called “the solidarity project” of social-democratic reformism, the solidaristic energies of the labor movement were coopted and attached to the building of the nation-state, which built up what Bourdieu has called “the left hand of the state,” in a reconstitution of the social that Karl Polanyi calls “the double movement” (Reiner, 2012: 141; Bourdieu, 1998: 2; Polanyi, 1958).

American nationalism, while historically containing democratic content, developed in an extremely racialized way and the progressive elements deriving from the American Revolution stood in dialectical contradiction with the racist elements that legitimized genocide of the native population, slavery, and that continue to serve in the legitimizing of overseas empire (Wood, 1991; Drinnon, 1980; Langman and Lundskow, 2016). The United States, one could say, expressed in particularly acute form the contradiction between bourgeois liberal ideology and the material reality of the bourgeois economy. The construction of the ‘other’ to whom liberal protections and status did not apply allowed the construction a ‘we’ identity associated with a liberal conception of the negatively free individual. This dialectic can be seen in the history of restrictive racialized immigration policy and in the civil rights struggles by which African Americans laid claim to full citizenship and membership in the nation-state. The association of anti-Communism with ‘Americanism’ exemplified the use of nationalism to suppress class conflict. At the same time, the other side of the deal with nationalistically-oriented organized labor in the form of the AFL-CIO, was the legitimacy of the expectation of a certain standard of living associated with the category of ‘middle-class.’ In the mid-twentieth century, a certain standard of normalcy was constructed around an idealized middle-class style of life. National identity was constructed around a self-image of affluence and this self-image was racialized as white (thereby excluding a significant portion of those who might threaten this idealized ‘we’ by the reality of their poverty and obvious powerlessness). The whiteness of normalcy reflected the racial exclusions from the Keynesian-Fordist social compact, exclusions the contradictions of which were expressed in the civil rights struggle (Rose, 2014; Dudziak, 2000).

The collective narcissistic wound with which Trump’s individual narcissism resonates, and which motivates projective identification with him among his predominantly white male supporters, has a great deal to do with the conflation between the Keynesian-Fordist compact and America’s racialized nationalism. The loss of America as taken-for-grantedly, and semi-officially, ‘the white man’s country,’ is conflated by his supporters with the loss of community and economic security as a result of the destruction of the Keynesian-Fordist compact. This coincided with the end of the Vietnam war without victory, the normalization of relations with China, the OPEC oil price shock, the rise of Japanese competition, etc., in other words, the decline of America’s postwar dominance (Killen, 2006). It also coincided with the rise of the youth counterculture and sexual revolution and feminism, and the cultural transformation that tended away from authoritarianism (Langman, 1971). In the decades since the seventies, deindustrialization and the rise of information and services sectors have produced declining opportunities for so-called ‘unskilled’ manual workers, those without a college degree, and the end of the family wage. This

has taken away the economic supports for a version of industrial masculinity, which was, in itself, an important support for ontological security, in tandem with the ideology of the nuclear family (Faludi, 1999; Fraad, 2019; Langman and Lundskow, 2017: 241-244). At the same time, cultural shifts toward reflexive politicization of relationships, were underway that were particularly challenging for male heterosexual conceptions of self (Giddens, 1992; Langman and Lundskow, 2017: 245-258). Male anger about the loss of economic security has been conflated with these cultural and political changes and fueled conservative authoritarian backlash.

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 penetrated the puffed up but already very fragile group narcissistic bubble which the American elite had inflated in the culture of the United States in the form of nationalist rhetoric and the promotion of a triumphalist, jingoistic, nationalistic belief system. The scab of nationalism was only thinly covering the narcissistic wound. The reopening of the narcissistic wound motivated an explosion of violent patriotism based on projective identification with the state (for example, in the form of ‘the flag’ and through the increasingly sacred institution of the military) and on paranoid-schizoid splitting and projection onto the foreign enemy (Stein, 1994: 1-19, 57-71; Clarke and Hoggett, 2004). In a collective act of cognitive dissonance, the blow suffered only served to reinforce the effort to preserve the fantastic narcissistic protective shell. It was, however, increasingly brittle. The Great Recession starting with the collapse of the housing market in 2007 served to undermine faith in the social-political ideology of the ‘American dream’ and a great gap has opened up between the youth and retirement-age generations which is not only a gap of values but of material security and belief in the prevailing legitimations. It is into this context that Trump stepped when he ran for President, offering particularly older white and male voters a magical hope that through identification with him they could restore a lost past, a fantasy in which they fetishistically associated ontological security with white cultural dominance and with American dominance of the world economically and militarily. This group-narcissistic function of military dominance also supports a physically brutal and psychologically rigid kind of masculinity (Langman and Lundskow, 2017: 167-188). The anger and sadism of Trump’s followers may be understood as arising from wounded narcissism (cf. Smith, 2018). Authoritarian carnival salves the wound by creating a sense of power. George Lundskow writes about the authoritarian carnival of the Tea Party movement:

willful ignorance combines with personal insecurity to create the main attraction of carnivalization—power. The power to say what is true and what is not, and more intensely, what is good and what is evil. The power to decide absolute right and wrong inherently bestows the ability to decide who is a real person and who isn’t, who benefits and who suffers, who lives—and who dies (Lundskow, 2012: 131-132).

This power is real in the sense that the participation in what Lundskow (2019) has called the “carnivalized ethnonationalism” of Trump rallies, is participation in a real movement that really brought Trump to power and thereby enacts real violence and domination against its ‘others’, such as immigrants (cf. Giroux, 2011: 95-100). But it is also a spectacular and illusory power because the projective identification with Trump is an illusion. His supporters are not him. He is not them. He is a billionaire member of the super-rich whose project is the plundering of society and the state on behalf of that class of which he is a member.

Just as Trump is both Carnival King and a real king, he channels the anger generated by the narcissistic wound, and the sense of betrayal and broken promise, back into support for the very class and system responsible for that betrayal. Channeling fury with the technocratic liberalism blamed for the betrayal, Trumpian carnival took over a hollowed-out public sphere

and political process that had reduced itself to empty spectacle (Wolin, 2008; Mair, 2013; Kellner, 2016). Trump moved into a space vacated by the pre-existing “omni-crisis of the institutions” (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 197; see also Grossberg, 2018: 35), i.e. the decline of the legitimacy of **mediating** institutions. Into this institutional vacuum moves capital in its most predatory and parasitic form, assuming direct control of the state. As Lawrence Grossberg has said, what is taking place “**under the cover of chaos,**” or, I would say, equivalently, under the cover of carnival, is not only the takeover but the dismantling of the modern (‘administrative’) state by corporations and even the breakdown of the distinction between corporate and state power (Grossberg, 2018: 136-142).

Conclusion: The Carnival of Capital

With his business dealings in real estate and casinos, frequently operating in a grey zone between legitimate business and organized crime (Johnston, 2017), Trump is the embodiment of the new bubble economy, based on finance, insurance, and real estate, or FIRE. Trump University epitomized Trump’s approach: it was an empty shell of hype (Zimbaro and Sword, 2017: 25-26; Johnston, 2017: 117-125). The rise of the FIRE economy has been continually intertwined with economic and social crisis. Indeed, as Naomi Klein has argued, we have entered a period of “disaster capitalism” which thrives off crises and shocks to make money and to intimidate electorates (Klein 2007: 168). These interconnected sectors have become dominant as manufacturing has declined. As Eric Janszen notes, the FIRE economy relies on inherently unstable and crisis-ridden asset price markets (Janszen, 2008: 40-41). As a result, FIRE depends on governmental and central bank action, effectively as the insurer of last resort, to prop up asset prices, as in the TARP bank bailout of 2008, the maintenance of low interest rates, and the trillions of dollars made available by Trump to the banks and corporations as a response to the coronavirus pandemic (Beams, 2011, 2020). Capital extracts public funds to prop itself up, while, under the rule of finance capital, the nation-state treats the national population as disposable, even expendable. Trump’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic has combined acute concern for the reaction of the stock market, with indifference to the wellbeing of the population, evidenced by insufficient tests and slow and chaotic implementation of emergency measures (Newmyer, 2020; Kishore and North, 2020). The Trump administration’s dismantling of the administrative state meant, for example, the ending, just two months before the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak in China, of a pandemic early-warning program established by the U.S. Agency for International Development (Baumgaertner and Rainey, 2020).

The financialized bubble economy allows capital to, temporarily, float free from the long-term stagnation of the real economy and the long-term declining rate of profit. But this comes at the expense of economic stability. Financialization is symptomatic of deeper obstacles to profit-making in the labor process in the manufacture of commodities in which intense international competition under conditions of globalization combines with long-term stagnation (Foster and Magdoff, 2009; Harman 2009; Chesnais 2016; Kliman 2011; Brenner 2006). As it floats free from the real economy, capital severs its connection to any territory. Material production is itself de-territorialized as production can be moved globally and as supply chains extend globally. This allows capital to free itself from concern with the reproduction of any population.

Financial journalist Jeremy Warner writes in the right-wing [Daily Telegraph](#) in the U.K. that “from an entirely disinterested economic perspective, the COVID-19 might even prove mildly

beneficial in the long term by disproportionately culling elderly dependents” (Warner, 2020). This is not an aberrant comment but fits into an increasing tendency among the ruling class and its spokespeople to suggest that advances in medical care are creating an economic burden in the form of an aging population (Brown, 2012; Randall 2012, 2013, 2013a, 2017). Warner’s “entirely disinterested economic perspective” is the perspective of capital, which is “entirely disinterested” in populations that are not a source of surplus-value. Trump’s appointment, at the start of his administration, of the billionaire corporate raider and asset stripper, Carl Icahn, to an advisor position, lays bare the connection between Trump as a politician and the financialization processes that disorganize economic production and undermine society, for example closing down factories, firing workers, and closing hospitals because money can be more easily made elsewhere (Martin 2016; Martin, 2020; Cramer, 2020).

Capital demands that the state withdraw from the project of organizing national society, except externally through police coercion. Capital has relentlessly imposed dispossession and disposability within the United States as well as globally (Giroux 2003, 2006, 2012; Evans and Giroux, 2015: 45-74; Sassen, 2014; Beckett and Herbert, 2009). As financialized capital abandoned and rejected the Keynesian-Fordist welfarist project of societalization within the nation-state, the ruling class withdrew support from the mediating institutions and professions that had been responsible for the ‘pattern maintenance’ of integrative social order within the nation-state. In sharp contrast to mediation and societalization through the Keynesian state, the ruling class now turns the state into a more direct instrument of extraction from society, what James K. Galbraith (2009) calls a “Predator State.” Intolerant of any concession to the human needs of the working class and with no stake left in social order apart from the barest maintenance of law to protect property, the ruling class increasingly asserts its power to rule directly. The Predator State means bailouts for the banks, coupled with debtors prison for the working class (ACLU, 2010; Brown, 2010).

Trump is a manifestation of the shift to direct rule by capital that began in the New York City bankruptcy of 1975 (Moore, 2010: 3). It took even more extreme form in the Detroit bankruptcy of 2013 in which Michigan Governor Rick Snyder appointed corporate bankruptcy lawyer Kevin Orr as Emergency Manager with draconian powers to impose cuts and shut-offs in public services (White 2013). Flint, Michigan was also under emergency managers when it implemented the criminal decision to switch the water supply to the industrially polluted Flint River, resulting in mass lead poisoning (Huxtabook, 2016). The turn to direct rule by capital is illustrated by Hillary Clinton’s ingratiating statement at a Goldman Sachs event that “You know, I would like to see more successful business people run for office. I really would like to see that because I do think, you know, you don’t have to have 30 billion, but you have a certain level of freedom” (quoted in Carter 2016). The Democratic primaries of 2016 featured no less than two billionaire candidates in Tom Steyer and Michael Bloomberg. The billionaire President instantiates a broader impatience among the super-rich with the mediations of bourgeois democracy and a desire to rule directly. At the same time, the legalized bribery of campaign financing and lobbying practices in the U.S. assures ruling class control over the ‘democratic’ political process. For such reasons, Michael Hudson says that we have a “financialized democracy” which is equivalent to “oligarchy” (Hudson, 2010: 442; see also Gill 2019).

The ruling class’s abandonment of mediating institutions and refusal and undoing of past social settlements is a response to the imperatives of global competition and the opportunities of globalization. The pressures of globalization have intensified rivalries between capitalist nation-

states and between the major imperialist powers (Saccarelli and Varadarajan, 2015: 206-217). And capital at the same time is able to escape the restrictions of national boundaries. Under these conditions, ruling classes are increasingly unwilling to allow any concessions through nation-states to secure the wellbeing of their populations. This is particularly true of the United States of America and the abandonment of populations, seen in New Orleans, Puerto Rico, and Flint, Michigan is now generalized to the whole population as a result of the criminally negligent failure of the U.S. government to prepare for COVID-19 pandemic. Chris Hedges writes, “The malaise that infects Americans is global. Hundreds of millions of people have been severed by modernity from traditions, beliefs, and rituals, as well as communal structures, which kept them rooted. They have been callously cast aside by capitalism as superfluous.” (Hedges, 2018: 177) However, the particular predicament of the American working class is not that it has been severed from tradition, but that it has been cut off from **modernity**. What has become more and more apparent is that rather than substituting a new social settlement in place of the Keynesian-Fordist post-war compact, neoliberalism is fundamentally socially corrosive (Derber, 2013).

The hollowed-out state, a vehicle for corporate plunder, is a void. This void is personified in the narcissistic character of Donald Trump. Tony Schwartz, who ghostwrote the book, The Art of the Deal, that created Trump’s public image, said that what struck him about the real Trump, not the fictional figure he created through his prose, was “his willingness to run over people, the gaudy, tacky, gigantic obsessions, the absolute lack of interest in anything beyond power and money.” This was a man without interiority, driven “by an insatiable hunger for ‘money, praise, and celebrity.’” Schwartz sees Donald Trump as “a living black hole” (quoted in Mayer 2016; see also Schwartz, 2017: 72). As the Carnival King of capital, Trump is the personal embodiment of anomie.

Endnotes

1. “Keeping Up with the Kardashians,” Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Keeping_Up_with_the_Kardashians (accessed March 22, 2020).
2. On Trump’s narcissistic defenses against shame, see Frank, 2018.

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