

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نپاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم و بر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

BY BRUCE E. LEVINE

21.03.2024

You Want It Darker: A Sick Society, Trump Worshippers, and the Drama Triangle



Photograph Source: Michael Candelori from Philadelphia – [CC BY 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/)

On March 3, 2024, the *New York Times*/Siena poll reported: “Donald Trump leads Joe Biden, 48 percent to 43 percent, among registered voters.” Millions of Americans are in a state of horror over the fact that millions more Americans are poised to elect as president not just a scumbag, but an in-your-face scumbag.

The horrified ask: What will it take for Trump’s supporters to finally become horrified by Trump? How much financial fraud? How much election interference? How many incited insurrections? How many obstructions of justice? How much felonious pilfering of national defense documents? How many contractors ripped off through bankruptcies? How many sexual assaults? How many “grab em by the pussy” comments?

By 2016, Trump recognized that his worshippers are unfazed by his legal and moral crimes, famously saying: “I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody, and I wouldn’t lose any voters, OK? It’s, like, incredible.”

Among those millions of Americans who are horrified by Trump and his worshippers, only a small minority of them are horrified by a society that has created them.

A Sick Society and Erich Fromm

How has a society become sick enough to create a Trump and his worshippers?

Psychoanalyst and social psychologist Erich Fromm in *Escape from Freedom*, published in 1941, sought to explain the spread of fascism and authoritarianism, most prominently in Hitler’s Germany, Mussolini’s Italy, Franco’s Spain, and Stalin’s Soviet Union. Fromm concluded that freedom from medieval institutions and its traditional bonds, “though giving the individual a new feeling of independence, at the same time made him feel alone and isolated, filled him with doubt and anxiety, and drove him into new submission and into a compulsive and irrational activity.”

Such compulsive and irrational activities include a variety of escapes from being truly alive and forming loving bonds. One type of escape is submission to authoritarians such as Hitler, Mussolini, Franco, Stalin (or Putin and Trump). Humans also escape, Fromm noted, into destructiveness and conformity, such as automaton worker and consumer submission to a materialistic society. While there are red-team Trump worshippers, there are also blue-team Apple worshippers—all escaping freedom, fleeing into compulsive and irrational activities that render them loveless, soulless, insane, and dead.

Alienated in their work lives and alienated from their non-communities, Americans are also increasingly alienated from their societal institutions, for which the vast majority of Americans have no trust. A Gallup 2023 poll reported only a minority of Americans have confidence in the police (43%), the medical system (34%) banks (26%), public schools (26%), newspapers (18%), the criminal justice system (17%), television news (14%), big business (14%), and the three branches of the US government: the Supreme Court (27%), the presidency (26%), and Congress (8%).

The term *alienation*, Fromm reminds us in his 1955 book *The Sane Society*, was once used to denote an insane person, and he states, “This alienation and automatization leads to an ever-increasing insanity. Life has no meaning, there is no joy, no faith, no reality. Everyone is ‘happy’—except that he does not feel, does not reason, does not love.”

Fromm was a democratic socialist who, in *The Sane Society*, was sharply critical of both Western capitalism and the Soviet Union’s bastardization of communism: “They both are

thoroughly materialistic in their outlook. . . . Everybody is a cog in the machine, and has to function smoothly.”

When a society is organized solely around capital and material accumulations—in other words, dead shit—it is no surprise that such a dead-shit toxic environment will create dead-shit sick families, unless the family rebels from such an environment. The more polite professional term for dead-shit sick is *dysfunctional*, and to the extent that a family is dysfunctional, it is loveless. Absent loving bonds, there are only transactional bonds in which family members narcissistically get their needs met for attention, security, and power by mutual objectification and manipulation.

The Karpman Drama Triangle

Fifty years ago, there were leading psychiatrists who focused on these dysfunctional mutual objectifications and manipulations. Today, that might come as a surprise to young critical thinkers, seeing only thought-leader psychiatrists who are drug-company whores—spouting pseudo-scientific theories of mental illness that maintain the societal status quo by blaming emotional suffering and behavioral disturbances on nonexistent biological-chemical defects in individuals, rather than challenging societal ills.

Fifty years ago, there were well-known psychiatrists—including Eric Berne, Murray Bowen, Nathan Ackerman, Salvador Minuchin, Don Jackson, and Stephen Karpman—who observed interactions and transactions in families and other groups, distinguishing between narcissistic bonds and loving ones.

The Drama Triangle, described by Karpman in 1968, depicts a destructive interactional drama that occurs in dysfunctional families and other loveless groups. The “actors” in the Drama Triangle play different roles, but are all narcissists committed to objectification and manipulation of others to selfishly meet their needs. The actors play three different roles: the *persecutor*, the *victim*, and the *rescuer*, and their selfish trips are both overt and covert. The same person can take on a different role when needs are not met; for example, victims and rescuers who fail to get their needs met routinely become persecutors.

The perverse genius of Trump—similar to Hitler’s perverse genius—is that he can dramatically project all three of these sicko roles simultaneously; and such a performance is magnetic for the damaged individual stuck in one of these roles and aspiring to another one. For such an individual, this drama is not seen as drama but as reality—a reality in which objectification and manipulation are the only ways to get needs met.

The Persecutor Role: The persecutor in this drama is sometimes called the *villain* or the *bully*. When things go wrong for either themselves or for others, the persecutor relishes

blaming and humiliating others for their uselessness, stupidity, and weakness. Persecutors take no responsibility for anything bad happening either to themselves or others. They make clear that the opinions of others are worthless, as only they know who and what is to blame. Persecutors meet their needs for power by beating up on a pathetic victim. In clinical practice, a stereotypic persecutor role can be played by parents or spouses of destructive/self-destructive substance abusers, with the persecutor forming a bond with this substance abuser victim via humiliation.

We regularly see how Trump relishes the persecutor role, from his name-calling of his opponents, to his lashing out at anyone who wavers in total loyalty to him. By shamelessly relishing this persecutor role, he magnetically connects with millions of Americans who have shame over their victim role and crave to be persecutors, but are ashamed of that role as well.

The Victim Role: Victims manipulatively demand—aggressively and passive-aggressively so—rescue from others. The goal of victims is to convince others of the victims’ unfair treatment by their world, including family and society, which is to blame for their misery and failures. Victims take no responsibility for their lives, and they pressure others to rescue them, routinely attempting to guilt-trip others. In clinical practice, a stereotypic victim role is played by self-pitying substance abusers who blame their destructive/self-destructive behaviors on the persecution of them by the world, and they manipulate others to rescue them.

Trump claims victimization in many ways—from an election stolen from him, to a justice system out to get him. By shamelessly playing this role, he magnetically connects with millions of Americans who have shame over their victim role.

The Rescuer Role: The selfish motivations of the rescuer are more covert than the other drama participants, but the rescuer is just as narcissistic as the persecutor and the victim. Rescuers—in contrast to caring and loving coaches or teachers—are not truly committed to helping another person, as rescuers need victims to be dependent on them so as to get met their needs for control and attention. Rescuers also meet their status needs of being seen as heroes, which provides the rescuer with a savior identity, making the rescuer deeply dependent on a helpless victim for that identity. In clinical practice, a stereotypic rescuer role is also played by parents or spouses of destructive/self-destructive substance abusers, as such rescuers enable these victims to remain in that role by keeping them financially and psychological dependent on them.

Trump also relishes the role of rescuer and hero, “making America great again” by building the biggest wall to save the United States from Latino invaders, by talking tough to the evil

Chinese, and by saving real Americans from the dreaded liberals. By shamelessly playing the role of rescuer and savior, Trump magnetically connects with victims who desperately crave a hero rescuer.

To repeat, Trump's perverse talent is to simultaneously project the roles of persecutor-victim-rescuer—the unholy trinity that occurs in dysfunctional/loveless families and societies. Trump's shameless personification of that unholy trinity and his shameless objectification and manipulation of others makes him irresistible to those ashamed of their own darkness.

Trump's great luck is to appear on the scene when US society has become so sick that playing these Drama Triangle roles no longer costs one status. In the 1960s, US society was sick enough to elect lying bastard presidents Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon, however, US society was not so sick as to worship victims and persecutors.

So, after Nixon's 1960 presidential defeat, when he believed that an election victory had been stolen from him (a belief, unlike Trump's, that had at least some justification), Nixon voiced his victimization only privately, knowing full well that publicly claiming victimization during this era would end his political career. Nixon would only go "full frontal" as a victim when he believed his political career was over and that he had nothing to lose; this occurred when he lost the 1962 election for governor of California, after which in a press conference he famously remarked: "You don't have Nixon to kick around anymore. Because, gentlemen, this is my last press conference." In 1962, Nixon's victim performance was seen by much of the public as pathetic, ignoble, and unmanly. However, times have clearly changed.

You Want It Darker

In October 2016, shortly before singer-song writer Leonard Cohen's death and the election of Trump as president, Cohen's album *You Want It Darker* was released. In the album's title cut, "You Want It Darker," Leonard begins this way:

If you are the dealer, I'm out of the game
If you are the healer, it means I'm broken and lame
If thine is the glory, then mine must be the shame
You want it darker
We kill the flame

As dark of a picture I've so far painted, perhaps I've been too sanguine. In "The Mass Psychology of Trumpism," psychologist Dan P. McAdams, author of *The Strange Case of Donald J. Trump* (2020) states: "My argument, as strange as it might sound, is that Trump's enduring appeal stems from the perception—his own and others'—that he is not a person."

Could it be that the more US society is dehumanizing and ruled by objectifications and manipulations that an actual person—a human being capable of loving relationships—makes many Americans uncomfortable, and so increasing numbers of Americans are compelled to worship a nonperson?

McAdams reminds us of the victim-persecutor-rescuer archetype of Satan who is able to manipulate damaged people to worship him:

“A malignant narcissism rages at the core of Satan’s personality. Cast out of heaven for his overmastering pride, Satan wants to be God, resents the fact that he is not God and insists that his supreme worth entitles him to privileges that nobody else should enjoy while undergirding his reign as sovereign of the mortal world below. Wholly self-centered, cruel, vindictive and devoid of compassion and empathy, Satan nonetheless possesses substantial charisma and charm. Completely contractual in his approach to interpersonal relationships, he has perfected the art of the deal, as when, in the Gospel of Luke, Satan tempts Jesus with earthly powers and riches in return for his adulation: ‘If thou wilt therefore worship me, all shall be thine.’”

McAdams’s depiction of Satan has a further uncanny resemblance to Trump: “He is not troubled by a complex inner life, by the doubts, ambivalences and moral quandaries that routinely run through the consciousness of mature humans.”

For those ashamed of their humanity, it is “weakness” to take seriously marital fidelity, friendship, civility, and human decency. Thus, Trump, who pisses on these, is to be worshipped by the shame-based.

Trump sees himself as unlike other humans, McAdams points out: “He has often compared himself to a superhero. Trump has famously described himself as a ‘stable genius’ who has never made a mistake.” Trump’s belief about himself is also the belief about him of his worshippers, who view the Drama Triangle as life itself, and who see themselves as victims needing a super hero persecutor/rescuer to save them.

Escaping the Drama Triangle

Psychotherapists routinely see clients who report depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and other emotional suffering and behavioral disturbances; not all but many of these clients grew up in a Drama Triangle family, or they have naively entered into this drama through a significant relationship. Skilled therapists see the emotional suffering/behavioral disturbances of such clients not as “symptoms” of “mental illness,” but instead as a wake-up call to the reality that their soul is being threatened through participation in a sick drama.

Useful therapy begins with the client gaining awareness of theirs and others' roles in this drama, and therapy then facilitates the gaining of strength to extricate from this sick game. Helpful for some clients is discovering alternatives to the “one-up” and “one-down” roles of the Drama Triangle. One such alternative is The Empowerment Dynamic (TED), created by David Emerald.

In Emerald's empowering-loving alternative, instead of playing the victim role, the client is encouraged to become a *creator* (or problem solver) who employs life's challenges as fuel for learning and discovering, and who focuses on solution outcomes. The alternative to the persecutor is the *challenger* (or truth teller) who, rather than bullying and humiliating, lovingly facilitates others seeing crucial realities. And the rescuer is encouraged to become a *coach* (or teacher) who, rather than enabling the dependence of a victim, sees others as capable of solving their own problems, assisting them via questions rather than sermons to examine goals and focus on consequences of their choices.

However, if a client is committed to a Drama Triangle role—such as being a victim—one can be a highly talented therapist yet find oneself becoming a sicko persecutor or a rescuer. We all become sick when we remain in the Drama Triangle.

It is difficult to predict what will happen in US society. As noted, only a small minority of those millions of Americans who are horrified by Trump and his worshippers recognize them as symptoms of a sick society. Only a small minority are not in denial that increasing alienation and automatization in US society, in Fromm's words, “leads to an ever-increasing insanity,” where, “Life has no meaning, there is no joy, no faith, no reality. Everyone is ‘happy’—except that he does not feel, does not reason, does not love.”

Insane societies, lacking reason and love, submit to authoritarians and their henchman, who can either be quite clever or more dull-witted, and who can either be more or less capable of wreaking havoc. Americans, at least European Americans, have been relatively lucky in this regard. But it is insane to believe that such luck will last forever.

[Bruce E. Levine](#), a practicing clinical psychologist, writes and speaks about how society, culture, politics, and psychology intersect. His most recent book is [A Profession Without Reason: The Crisis of Contemporary Psychiatry—Untangled and Solved by Spinoza, Freethinking, and Radical Enlightenment](#) (2022). His Web site is brucelevine.net

MARCH 20, 2024