

Donald Trump as Trickster Clown

Written by Joan Davison

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JOAN DAVISON, JUL 15 2016

Donald Trump, as the master of ceremonies at his campaign events, yells “Build that,” and crowds mimicking what they know shout “wall”. He targets dissenters, ranting “Get him,” and the supporters, imitating previous rallies, respond “out of here”. These political gatherings sometimes become violent spectacles in which attendees, rather than listening to platform statements, verbally and physically abuse and exile dissenters. In so doing, solutions appear simple – banish certain people. Participants need not wait for a candidate to be elected or a policy to be implemented because they feel empowered through the mutual reaffirmation of their righteousness despite the uncertain social and economic times.

Political anthropology studies sometimes discuss “tricksters” or “demonic clowns” who take advantage of people who feel confused or alienated during times of transitions. Trump fits this paradigm of a trickster clown. He possesses the rhetorical skill, clownish mannerisms, bullying demeanor, and occasionally pornographic humor to dupe individuals desperately seeking relief from an ambiguous social status.

The disorientation and disenchantment of Trump supporters vary with their age and are difficult to date precisely, but have festered with certain critical events and policies. Clearly the past five decades in the United States have marked a time of transition which contributes to the ambiguity of the identity and influence of many white men. The 1960’s civil and voting rights movements, the 1970s women’s equality movement, and the 1980s Gay Rights movement mark challenges to the preferential status of the traditional white American male. Policies such as affirmative action and Title IX often seem unjust. At the same time, working class and middle class males additionally confront the results of free trade, globalization, and the revolutions in technology, computers, and robots. Cumulatively, these processes have led to job losses, particularly for the working class. Specifically related phenomena are the decline in full time jobs, the growth of contract work with limited benefits, and the disappearing prospect of upward mobility. Globalization not only sends factory jobs abroad, but brings talented immigrants to America.

Notable other developments also tend to disturb the self-identity of white American males. The events of 9/11 and subsequent inability to build democracy and/or defeat enemies raise doubts regarding American exceptionalism. Challenges to homeland security introduce uncertainties about Americans’ ability to defend home and hearth. The Supreme Court, once white protestant men, now includes three women, one black man, one Puerto Rican woman, five Catholics, and three Jews; there are no white Protestants on the court. Finally, Obama’s 2008 election and 2012 reelection confirmed the perception of the demise of the status of the white male. The status of some women and minorities has improved, while economic opportunities, especially for working class males, decline.

While all Americans must transition through the US’s relative decline of global prestige and power, the impact is differential and when disaggregated, men more so than women, the working class more so than the capital class, and the high school educated more so than the college educated, are hurt. While most Americans realize transition is underway, for certain Americans the consequences are devastating; the situation appears a permanent trap. Manipulative politicians, tricksters, such as Trump, can deceive such confused and frightened individuals. Trump defines himself as an outsider and warrior. He is not to blame for the current problems, but rather someone who will fight against Muslims, Mexicans, Chinese, and the corruption inside the Beltway. Although real problems exist, such as the loss of jobs in industry or the decline of opportunities for upward mobility, Trump proposes simplistic solutions to complex problems. Job loss – build a wall!

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Political commentators and Republican Party officials initially dismissed Trump's candidacy as a publicity stunt. They perceived him as a showman and clown. Indeed, Trump's background supports such misgivings. As a real estate scion Trump made his money in speculative investments rather than productive enterprises that add value and jobs to the economy. He served as a bullying mentor and boss on the reality program, "The Apprentice," where he led young employees through a transition. Additionally, Trump owned Miss Universe pageants, at which reports claim he ridiculed and teased contestants.

As a candidate Trump has theatricalized the campaign in order to intensely engage his followers. His rallies are spectacles. One senses supporters attend not to listen to a speech, but to participate in a challenge to their present reality. People expect certain gestures and chants; people also anticipate violence from the emotional, often frenzied crowd. Trump as a mean, clownish trickster knows few bounds as he abusively ridicules people, especially women and minorities. His derisive monikers for his opponents include little Marco, low energy Jeb, lying Ted, crooked Hillary, and crazy Bernie. He has levied attacks at other individuals and groups: calling Rosie O'Donnell a slob, labelling Mexicans rapists, and implicitly referring to moderator Megyn Kelly's menstruation. Perhaps most illustrative of the trickster clown, Trump physically imitated a disabled reporter while laughingly relating to his supporters: "You should have seen this guy". Trump portrays groups of people as villains. As the master, however, these portrayals create a new viral reality for his supporters. During rallies he sometimes gives a nod to physical violence against dissenters. Asking security to remove individuals, he often follows with an aside: "Try not to hurt him, if you do I'll defend you in court," or "knock the crap" out of him. Indeed, Trump's rallies are chaotic environments devoid the normal limits of social behavior. Yet, his followers feel alone and trivialized. Political parties and politicians created the space for Trump because they have not addressed the real problems and consequences of economic and social transition.

About the author:

Joan Davison is Professor of Political Science at Rollins College, Winter Park, Florida where she teaches courses in comparative and international politics and is Director of the Program in International Relations. Recent publications include: "Sarajevo Heart of Europe? Global Politics, Symbol(ism) & Liminality in the Centenary of WW1," with Jesenko Tesan, *International Political Anthropology* 2014 (1): 27- 46; and "The Left's Attraction amidst Bosnia and Herzegovina's Nationalist Politics," chapter in *Left and Right: The Great Dichotomy Revisited*, (2013) eds. Joao Cardoso Rosas and Rita Ferreira. London: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.