Article

THE NARCISSISTIC DYNAMICS OF SUBMISSION: THE ATTRACTION OF THE POWERLESS TO AUTHORITARIAN LEADERS

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Ferenczi's conception of identification with the aggressor, which describes children's typical response to traumatic assaults by family members, provides a remarkably good framework to understand mass social and economic trauma. In the moment of trauma, children instinctively submit and comply with what abusers want—not just in behavior but in their perceptions, thoughts, and emotions—in order to survive the assault; afterwards they often continue to comply, out of fear that the family will turn its back on them. Notably, a persistent tendency to identify with the aggressor is also typical in children who have been emotionally abandoned by narcissistically self-preoccupied parents, even when there has not been gross trauma. Similarly, large groups of people who are economically or culturally dispossessed by changes in their society typically respond by submitting and complying with the expectations of a powerful figure or group, hoping they can continue to belong—just like children who are emotionally abandoned by their families. Not surprisingly, emotional abandonment, both in individual lives and on a mass scale, is typically felt as humiliating; and it undermines the sense that life is meaningful and valuable.

But the intolerable loss of belonging and of the feeling of being a valuable person often trigger exciting, aggressive, compensatory fantasies of specialness and entitlement. On the large scale, these fantasies are generally authoritarian in nature, with three main dynamics—sado-masochism, paranoid–schizoid organization, and the manic defense—plus a fourth element: the feeling of emotional truth that follows narcissistic injury, that infuses the other dynamics with a sense of emotional power and righteousness. Ironically, the angry attempt to reassert one's entitlements ends up facilitating compliance with one's oppressors and undermining the thoughtful, effective pursuit of realistic goals.

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INTRODUCTION

My aim in this paper is to use psychoanalytic trauma theory to try to understand why people are drawn to strongmen, and authoritarian movements, that threaten their own autonomy and interests. My interest in people's willing sacrifice of their autonomy (Frankel, 2002) was first kindled by Ferenczi's (1933) observations of the effects of child abuse within families, and turned in a political direction (Frankel, 2015a) when the right-wing populist wave that had been growing in some other countries crashed onto American shores, first in the form of the Tea Party, more than a decade ago. The similarities between how children respond to abuse, and how followers of these movements behaved, were unavoidable to me. Since then, I've used Ferenczi's and other psychoanalytic theories of trauma to help me understand what gives life to this kind of mass, self-defeating submission.

The heart of Ferenczi's trauma theory is what he called *identification with the aggressor* (Ferenczi, 1933)—a term more often associated with Anna Freud's (1936) later, and somewhat different, meaning.[2] Ferenczi observed that children typically protect themselves from abuse not only by dissociating their own feelings and perceptions, but by becoming instantly hypersensitive to what the abuser requires from them (also see Gurevich, 2015; Lahav, Talmon, Ginzburg & Spiegel, 2019), and compulsively complying with his wishes (also see Crittenden & DiLalla, 1988). This happens not just in behavior, but at a deep level—these children identify with the abuser's perceptions, needs, and feelings rather than their own (also see Lahav et al., 2019; Lahav, Talmon & Ginzburg, 2021). In the moment of trauma, they submit in these ways in order to survive; later, they do it out of fear that their family will turn its back on them (see Howell, 2014). In these children, identification with the aggressor often becomes an enduring tendency in their interpersonal relations. My own clinical observations (Frankel, 2002) led me to understand that many events not generally seen as gross trauma *also* evoke this kind of response—especially, being emotionally abandoned, including being exploited by a narcissistically preoccupied parent to meet the parent's own needs (Frankel, 2022).

The impact of emotional abandonment goes even further. First, it damages the child's sense of her own value. Emotional abandonment is felt as shameful, humiliating (Frankel, 2015b; and see Kohut, 1972; Tomkins, 1987)—as if something about *the child is defective or wrong*, and that her defect makes her unlovable and is the reason the parent has turned away from her and denied her a valued place in the family.

Emotional abandonment also alienates the child from the world around her. The emotionally disengaged parent's failure to empathize and reliably adapt to the child's needs robs the child of the experience that the world is responsive, dependable, and welcoming (Winnicott, 1971, p. 108; Ferenczi, 1929), that it is *her* world and she has a place in it, and ultimately that "life is worth living" (Winnicott, 1971, p. 98; and see Ferenczi, 1929). Winnicott (1971) observed that such a child, living in a world emptied of personal meaning and value—of what he called the "potential space" (p. 107) that allows for authentic and creative engagement with others—functions, instead, on the basis of a "compliant false self" (p. 102); in essence, Ferenczi's identification with the aggressor.

As the parent's emotional abandonment forecloses the child's potential space, and the world comes to feel alien in consequence, the child may cling all the more strongly to some symbol of connection "as part of denial that there is a threat of its becoming alien" (Winnicott, 1971, p. 15). This observation is easily confirmed on a mass scale: people who feel threatened with dispossession by their society and turn toward narcissistic politics often fetishize symbols of that society.

Identification with the aggressor seems to be a widespread response, even in adults, in situations where people feel helpless in the face of threat—whether the threat is physical or involves social exclusion or disapproval. This happens even in people without histories of severe early trauma. Examples in the wider world include the Stockholm syndrome, where hostages become attached to, and even fall in love with, their captors (de Fabrique, Romano, Vecchi, & van Hasselt, 2007); Asch's (1951) classic research demonstrating the widespread tendency to conformity; Milgram's (1963) mock-electric-shock studies showing a widespread drive to obey authority; and Zimbardo's (Haney, Banks & Zimbardo, 1973) Stanford Prison Experiment, where many research subjects thoroughly identified with the guard or prisoner roles to which they were randomly assigned. The widespread, and often passionate, submission of masses of people to authoritarian leaders and movements, under the right circumstances, fits right in to this list.

As I've worked with this problem, a second dimension of the traumatic response has become increasingly clear. When the child cannot bear the anxiety, loneliness, shame and emptiness brought on by emotional

abandonment, or the smothering of self that comes with identifying with the aggressor, she may try to deny her terrible feelings through reassuring omnipotent fantasies, and behavior, that insist she's special, cool, or tough and powerful, or part of something grand, that she is more entitled than other people to have what she wants, or even that her own needs are all that matter.

On the mass level, large groups of people can share fantasies of being superior: exempt from expectations to get along with others outside their special group or to treat them decently, and even invulnerable to dangers in the physical world: think of some coronavirus vaccination skeptics, sure that the illness would not catch up with them.

These fantasies *look like* the direct opposite of the fear and submission that characterize identification with the aggressor. But they're *inseparable* from it and play a crucial role in *maintaining* it—two sides of a coin. The sense of personal power these fantasies offer is only on loan—a membership perk in the loyalty program. In the situation I'm looking at, an authoritarian strongman's disciples, intoxicated with their leader, eagerly submit and identify with him and imagine his power to be their own. They drink in the certainty and order he seems to personify and fill themselves with the vengeance and cruelty he embodies.

To understand these *mass* narcissistic fantasies, we can start by looking at the anxiety behind *clinical* narcissistic disturbances. Sheldon Bach (2006) described this as not feeling held in mind by others in an enduring and vital way—a feeling that typically begins in childhood and stems from a narcissistically preoccupied caregiver turning away, emotionally, from her child. She may emotionally detach or may use the child to regulate her own sense of wellbeing, rather than meeting her child's needs—the very situations that can drive identification with the aggressor.

On the mass scale, at certain times of social disruption, feeling one's valued place in one's society to be threatened, economically or otherwise, has been called *dispossession* by sociologist Daniel Bell (1955). Research suggests that people may be more likely to feel dispossessed when they believe their loss resulted from the malicious intent of others: when they believe others have deliberately pushed them out—for instance, people are more likely to have traumatic reactions to human-caused calamities than they are to natural disasters (Shalev, Tuval-Mashiach & Hadar, 2004; Mucci, 2013, p. 56, 58; APA, 2013); and extreme right-wing movements tend to arise following *financial* crises, where some people profit from others' misfortune, but not after other economic downturns (Funke, Schularick, & Trebesch, 2015). The loss of a social safety net, even when there's little threat of unemployment, can also contribute to a sense of economic

dispossession (Hacker, 2019). Betrayal by one's own society seems traumatic on the large scale, not only in the family.

Widespread feelings of *cultural* or *economic* dispossession often trigger right-wing extremism—narcissistic defense on a mass scale. Hannah Arendt said that it's people who feel isolated and lonely—*Verlassenheit*, meaning *abandoned*, is the word she used in German—who are susceptible to totalitarian temptations (Hill, 2020).

Along these lines, journalist Michael C. Bender (2021) found former president Trump's "hardcore rallygoers" to be "mostly older White men and women who lived paycheck to paycheck with plenty of time on their hands—retired or close to it, estranged from their families or otherwise without children—and Trump had, in a surprising way, made their lives richer." One told Bender: "Now we're like an army, and it's like boots on the ground. Tell us where we need to go!" These Trump camp-followers had found new connection, meaning, and passion in their lives.

The current neoliberal market-fundamentalist economic regime predominant in Western countries creates a foundation for widespread feelings of dispossession and abandonment, through policies that fuel wealth inequality, shred the social safety-net, and undermine social cohesion (Gandesha, 2018; Hacker, 2006).[3] As political theorist Samir Gandesha (2020) has summed this up, the great masses of people are "forced to take more responsibility for [themselves], yet, at the same time, have access to fewer resources with which to actualize such responsibility in any meaningful sense" (p. 129).

There is an additional element that can stem from economic and cultural threats, which often feeds the feeling of dispossession that leads to mass aggressive-narcissistic counterreactions—fear of a loss of privilege. Social psychologist Stephen Reicher and doctoral student Yasemin Ulusahin (2020) have called this "dominant group victimhood": a feeling "of actual or potential loss of dominance, a sense of resentment at this loss which is bound up with issues of entitlement—the undeserving are taking what we deserve." (Reicher & Ulusahin, 2020, p. 290). This "construction of victimhood" is shaped by leaders whose aim is to mobilize people around themselves as the group's savior. Violence is justified as "the restitution of a rightful moral order" (p. 291).

Even more specifically, it may be the *humiliation* of having lost one's privileged and special place that makes people vulnerable to the appeal of demagogues and grandiose aggressive fantasies. Political scholars Alexandra Homolar and Georg Löfflmann (2021) draw attention to demagogues' "populist humiliation discourse … [in which] Treasured pasts of national greatness are represented through romanticized images that reduce the present to a demeaning experience … the 'pure people' … have been

betrayed and humiliated." (p. 4-5). Psychoanalyst Ruth Stein (2009) and psychoanalytically informed terrorism-scholar Jessica Stern (2003) have both found personal humiliation to be prominent in the early lives of religious-fundamentalist terrorists. Political scholars Peter Bergen and Michael Lind (2007) argue that "Ambition and humiliation, personal and collective, inspire more political conflict than economic deprivation," and that "if our goal is to understand the conditions that give terrorist movements popular appeal and to understand how virulent ideologies spread from madmen and isolated sects to mass movements, our emphasis must be on subjective perceptions of national, religious, and ethnic humiliation, rather than on the humiliation, genuine as it may be, which is associated with poverty."

The feeling of alienation also makes people vulnerable to narcissistic politics. Terrorism expert Jessica Stern (2003), based on in-depth personal interviews with fundamentalist-religious terrorists around the world, identified alienation, in addition to humiliation, as a key personal grievance that drives people to embrace terrorism—the far edge of narcissistic politics. Psychoanalyst Endre Koritar (2022) has offered a compelling psychoanalytic case study of a young man who attempted to cope with feelings of aimlessness, emptiness, meaninglessness and alienation—the result of early emotional abandonment—through a passionate interest in violent ideology.

Ferenczi's (1933) conception of child abuse and its traumatic impact adds another dimension to dispossession. Ferenczi discovered that when parents deny the child's abuse or emotional abandonment, and their own role in causing it—when they tell her that nothing happened, or she's too sensitive, or that her mistreatment is her own fault (see Butler, 1996)—it becomes even harder for her to cope. Ferenczi called this "hypocrisy" (Ferenczi, 1932, p. 2; 1933, p. 158). Parents' hypocrisy makes a child feel confused, guilty, and ashamed, mistrust other people *and* her own perceptions, and feel even more isolated, alone, and afraid. She implicitly understands that she must buy into her family's phony story, so her family doesn't turn against her (see Freyd & Birrell, 2013); she stifles her development as a person separate from her family and stops speaking out for her own interests. She even stops thinking for herself, which could make her see things differently from them and lose her sense of belonging. She tries to be the compliant, submissive, pleasing child her parents want—she identifies with the aggressor. Parents' hypocrisy intensifies the child's anxiety about emotional abandonment, and the pathological consequences of emotional abandonment, by a quantum leap.

On the mass scale, hypocrisy becomes *ideology*, in the traditional sense of that word—a widely accepted, but false, story that justifies existing power relations and blames the victim. We can see this kind of fundamental dishonesty in capitalism's glossy story about its own benevolence, justifying

its excesses and denying the harm it does to individuals and society as a whole. A key aspect of the ideology of the über-capitalist American conservative movement is a "fundamentalist individualism" (Rustin, 2014, p. 158) that fetishizes self-sufficiency, personal responsibility, and competitiveness, discourages empathic social connection and communal feeling, and shames people for dependency, vulnerability, and failure, whatever the cause. It tells people that if they don't have a job it's because they're not trying hard enough to get one, that they're lazy—even when jobs are scarce. All misfortune is somehow people's own fault, so they don't deserve help from a "nanny state". Indeed, offering help will only make them dependent—even when helping themselves isn't possible, and despite evidence that it isn't so (Krugman, 2021).

And as people inevitably fall short of the ideals the ideology tells them they should measure up to—and that they internalize and believe—they're likely to use it against themselves—to beat themselves up for failing to live up to these omnipotent ideals, and to feel increasingly helpless, left out, isolated, and ashamed of their ordinary human vulnerabilities, and politically irrelevant and powerless (see Layton, 2014; Rustin, 2014; Gandesha, 2018; Frankel, 2016). People who feel helpless and afraid are likely to buy the lie, accept the crumbs, and stifle their shame, hoping they can continue to belong.

Which takes us right back to the exciting narcissistic fantasies that rush in to push away these feelings of helplessness, inferiority, humiliation, emptiness, and alienation. The plot line of these fantasies provides a focus for people's fear and hatred and opens a path of action to a sense of renewed potency in engaging the world; at the same time, the intoxicating feelings of superiority, power, and excitement that come with these fantasies distract people from the real causes of their suffering and mask their submission behind a guise of assertion. People may rebel in some way against those they're told to blame for stealing their power and pride. But a rebellion based on a grandiose fantasy *shaped* by people's oppressors leads them to fight for themselves in ways that actually *capitulate to* their real oppressors and don't help themselves (e.g., see Schneider, 2021). Think, for example, of Brexit "leavers," Trump's working-class faithful, and their brothers and sisters in other countries who've been lured away from thoughtful, reality-based consideration of their own actual social, economic, and even medical wellbeing by charismatic liars promising a magic carpet ride to prosperity and a return to some mythical nationalist "greatness."

THE ASPECTS OF NARCISSISTIC FANTASY AND THEIR ROLE IN POLITICAL LIFE

These compensatory narcissistic fantasies have several aspects (also, cf. Freud, 1921), each complementing the others, to make them more appealing, more powerful, and more effective at enforcing submission. These aspects have been extensively described in the *clinical* literature; I'll elaborate how they work on the *political* stage. And I'll introduce a further element that I see as crucial.

Aspect 1: Sadomasochism

I've already mentioned Bach's conception that the anxiety of emotional abandonment and the fear of being forgotten are at the core of narcissistic disturbances. In Bach's (1994) view, sadomasochistic object relations are how people try to solve this problem. The sadist reassures himself that he can treat people any way he chooses, even beat them, and they'll be unable to leave him; hurting the other is *necessary* to provide the proof. Masochists flee their helplessness and fear of loss by *submitting* to someone they *idealize* as powerful, essentially saying: mistreat me any way you want, just don't leave me.

Bach's work is important in understanding politics, in at least two ways. First, fears of being abandoned and forgotten correspond well to the feelings of *dispossession* on the large-scale that generally trigger mass turns toward the right. Second, sadomasochism is prominent in narcissistic—i.e., authoritarian—politics. There's obvious sadism in strongmen leaders—think of Trump's infamous statement, while running for office, that he could shoot someone on Fifth Avenue and not lose any voters: I can do anything, and you won't leave me. Think also of his policy of taking refugee children from their parents, and of his obvious delight in cruelty and violence. As journalist Adam Serwer (2018) has written about Trump: "the cruelty is the point" —it binds his dispossessed followers in shared rejoicing at the suffering of those they hate and fear. Even in rare moments when Trump seemed to soften, he let people know that he was in charge and could change his mind at any moment—that others' fates depended on his whims. In followers, we see a *masochistic* attitude toward the strongman—losing themselves in their idealization of him and their attraction to his power— and also *sadism*, including symbolic and sometimes physical violence toward scapegoats. Indeed, historian Heather Cox Richardson notes that in the 1930s "in the U.S., fascism grew out of political violence, not [an ideology]. Mobs … pieced together racist, antisemitic, and nationalistic ideas and became the popular arm of right-wing leaders. In America, the hallmark of budding fascism was populist street violence, rather than an

elite philosophy of government" (Richardson, August 11, 2021). Then as now, she points out, violence is the glue—an observation that, especially in light of Bach's observations, seems to confirm the primacy of narcissistic fantasy in violence-prone right-wing politics.

Aspect 2: The Paranoid–Schizoid Position, Including Envy

Melanie Klein elaborated two other dynamics that structure narcissistic fantasies, and which complement Bach's ideas: the paranoid–schizoid position, including envy; and the manic defense (and see Segal, 1964).

Klein's (1946) concept of the paranoid–schizoid position is a dark vision of the infant's psychological starting point in life. It may be a fanciful reconstruction of what infants go through—but it's a compelling model of certain forms of *adult* experience, and of how different elements of narcissistic functioning fit together as a unit.

To put Klein's rather intricate formulations as simply as I can: the infant, when hungry and frustrated, feels rage. But his undeveloped ego can't tolerate such intense feelings, so he "gets rid of them" by projecting his rage *into* his mother's breast, which he sees as withholding from him. Now, the infant sees the breast as an angry, "bad" breast, which persecutes and attacks him. He attacks back in fantasy—his next move in an endless, desperate, terrifying battle for survival.

Plus, projecting part of himself *into* his "enemy" makes him feel trapped inside her and in terrible danger. And he fears that his "attackers" can get inside *him* and attack him from the inside. The baby in this nightmare scenario needs a strong ally, so he also projects his *loving* feelings, into the "good" breast that feeds and satisfies—the *same* breast, of course, but a *different* one in the child's unformed mind. The baby's loving relationship with the good breast helps him feel protected.

Splitting the breast into good and bad can help Klein's relatively satisfied baby start to organize his world—a prerequisite for emotional growth. But a baby who's often frustrated and angry can't escape his endless, terrifying war against an unrelenting enemy. Desperate for a strong ally, the baby idealizes the good object to an extreme degree. In this black-and-white world, people are either hateful and dangerous, or especially strong and wonderful.

But Klein's frustrated, angry baby may also hate and *envy* the good object, precisely for its goodness, undermining his capacity to appreciate and care for others, and to feel comfortable and valuable in a world where other people are also generally felt to have value (Klein, 1957).

Whether or not babies live in this kind of paranoid–schizoid, envious world, it's clear that many adults *do*—*at least* partly, and *at least* sometimes. This is obvious in the sociopolitical realm: people split off and project their aggression and (we can add) their shame and alienation; in their black-and-white world, others are either good, or completely evil, often depending on which "tribe"—which religion, political party, or nationality—they belong to; they hate the "others" upon whom these "bad" parts of the self are projected, and refuse concern for them—a dehumanization made easier in a world where people often never get to know the targets of their hatred, who remain symbols rather than real people; people fear their communities are being infiltrated and taken over by bad, even subhuman, "others;" they idealize a leader as extraordinarily good and strong, identify with him, and feel magically protected; in their urgency to feel better, they're blind to complexities; in their preoccupation with external dangers, they don't reflect on or question themselves; and they envy, hate, and disparage those they see as more fortunate—especially those groups, or individuals, blessed with a social recognition that they themselves feel deprived of.

One form of paranoid splitting, now dominant in the political life of the US and many other countries, is tribalism. Cohesiveness in large groups is created through shared identification with grandiose fictional stories, such as religious or national myths. As historian Yuval Noah Harari (2011) argues, this evolutionary capacity may be essential in allowing trust, cooperation, and the development of societies far larger than people's circles of personal acquaintance. But when members of a subgroup feel their place in the larger collective is threatened—when they fear being dispossessed—their identification with the tribe may turn tight, rigid, defiant, and angry. *Conforming* to the group is rewarded with a sense of specialness, while *questioning* the group, its leaders, or its doctrines is an outrage that must be punished. Evidence and logical argument contrary to tribal dogma must be rejected, not only outwardly but in one's inner beliefs, in order to buttress the feeling of belonging. Submission must meet narcissistic standards of perfection: ideological purity is expected, critical or even independent thinking is unacceptable, and obedience and true belief are required, even when leadership shifts its positions radically—for instance, in the US, when Trump's sudden reversal of long-held Republican positions on free trade, Russia, and trust in the intelligence services were mirrored by a complete change of direction in that party. And in the past, on the left: the American Communist party twice quickly reversed its position toward Nazi Germany at the end of the 1930s, in direct response to the Stalin's quick turnabouts: first opposition to Germany; then sympathy, following the 1939 Hitler-Stalin nonaggression pact; and a return to

opposition two years later, when the Germans attacked the Soviet Union (Will, 2019).

Taking this a step further: believing lies told by the leader is an important marker of tribal belonging. As Harari (2019) puts it, "If you believe your leader only when he or she tells the truth, what does that prove? In contrast, if you believe your leader even when he or she builds castles in the air, that's loyalty!"[4] And believing a leader's lies makes disciples even more dependent on him, since they've committed themselves to rejecting any outside influence or standard—even truth. Perhaps it's an even *further* declaration of tribal loyalty—indeed, a declaration of despising the outsiders who criticize the tribe—when one not only believes the lies but *enjoys* the lying that so offends these outsiders' values.

As tribalism solidifies, hatred takes charge. Opponents become enemies. Politics becomes war, not a way to manage competing interests. Pragmatic compromise is betrayal, even treason. Hurting one's enemies is more pressing than helping one's own (Edsall, 2019, 2021; Mason, Wronski & Kane, 2019). Those outside the nation or class or race that constitutes the tribe are feared and hated; at the very least, they become invisible and human fellow feeling is withheld.

Briefly, the Kleinian school (Klein, 1946; Ogden, 1979) has described one more element of paranoid–schizoid thinking that makes such thinking especially dangerous in political life, and that dovetails with sadism, and with the manic defense (which I'll address below); this is projective identification—treating other people as nothing more than receptacles for one's own projections and feeling free to disregard them as the real human beings they are. In the extreme, this defense provides the basis for political leaders and groups feeling entitled to total control over other groups. Indeed, projective identification *demands* control over others; and sadism requires that this control *hurts* those who are treated this way.

Aspect 3: The Manic Defense

Now we come to the manic defense (Klein, 1935, and see Segal, 1964), a term that could be misunderstood. I don't mean the more familiar psychiatric *diagnosis* here, but a particular psychological *defense* that fights off intolerable feelings of dependency, despair, and guilt—*expectable* reactions when one's basic emotional needs are neglected—by fleeing to exciting, grandiose, escapist fantasies (see Peltz, 2005; Salgó, 2014). These omnipotent fantasies of power and self-sufficiency demean the other and deny one's need for her, and cover over the terrible pain of being disregarded. The manic attack on the other, in fantasy and often in behavior, is three-pronged: controlling

her, triumphing over her, and treating her with contempt—a sadistic combination. Contempt makes it easy to dismiss her humanity and attack her without guilt or a second thought. Indeed, manic attacks must be ceaseless, to make sure one's painful feelings of need, loss, and concern for her, which cannot be eradicated, stay pushed into the background. Self-reflection could undermine this frenzy and must also be stifled.

Manic control, triumph, and contempt are readily seen in the attitudes of authoritarian leaders and their followers toward the groups they attack, and even toward reality itself—for example, by denying the consequences of one's actions, like starting a war, refusing to wear masks or get vaccinated during a pandemic, or continuing to burn fossil fuels. The feelings are that nothing I do will hurt me and that I can do anything I want without thought or concern about what it will lead to. The need to defend this sense of omnipotence demands that the leader be seen as perfect, and that people feel rage at any criticism of him.

Manic disparagement and disregard merge seamlessly with schizoid dehumanization, paranoid splitting and rage, envious hatred, and sadism toward designated enemies. All these dynamics reflect a pressing need to rid oneself of one's intolerable feelings of abandonment and shame and force them into "others"—be they blacks, women, foreigners, Muslims, or Jews. And since narcissistic defenses can never actually kill one's intolerable feelings, narcissistic politics requires continuing violence—whether symbolic or actual—against those into whom these feelings are projected.

Images of leaders' strength, power, and fearlessness, and the pleasure they display in sadism toward the weak and vulnerable, excite their followers, who identify with and sometimes imitate these manic images. The weak and vulnerable, especially—symbolic repositories of one's own disavowed pain and shame—must be ridiculed; think of Trump's mockery of a disabled reporter (Politico, 2017), or his insulting nicknames for his opponents, often based on some physical characteristic (and cf. Parker & Rucker, 2019). They are the "losers," not him. Bullying, coarseness, and lying demonstrate power and display contempt for all vulnerabilities and sensitivities. Any credible show of tenderness or compassion must be avoided. Everyone must be excited and angry at all times. Values and principles beyond selfish interests—honesty, openness, decency, kindness, fairness, equality, humility, dignity, thoughtfulness, concern and generosity, compassion, responsibility, honoring commitments, objectivity, justice, law and legal procedure, democratic principles, hard work, morality, the courage to bear up, perseverance, knowledge, intellectual integrity—all are mocked as weakness, though they may be cynically paraded in public when it's useful to do so. The only "principle" that really matters, in this impoverished world, is the raw power to dominate and humiliate, to

shamelessly prove one's superiority and assert one's will—which must be demonstrated continuously. Bullying and bluster pass for strength. Defiance, *in itself*, is admirable, regardless of the reason.

In the US, manic politics on the right is reflected in various delusions of omnipotence that underlie the fetish for guns; the refusal of vaccines and masks; the idea of American exceptionalism; and the overvaluation of so-called "disruptors," rather than those who build or preserve. And in both the US and the UK, the tear-it-all-down (Fisher, 2019), blow-it-all-up version of popular democracy, whether in the name of freedom or sovereignty, that gives not a thought to what happens after the sense of power and the excitement of asserting one's will have worn off.

And of course, thrilling manic fantasies the leader purveys easily distract people's attention from the true aggressor and displace their hatred onto scapegoats.

It's important to note that these same essential elements of superiority, contempt, and aggression can be masked by the refined, "civilized," and "respectable" behavior of those in power.

Manic elements can also infect the *left's* social-justice politics—for instance, when those on the left make arguments that seem designed mainly to reinforce their own tribal solidarity and moral superiority through expressions of self-satisfied contempt and outrage. The left's righteous stance alienates the unconvinced, and makes itself an easy target for the right, distracting the dispossessed from the real source of their pain. The left's moral purity and certainty also defeats its own aims in other ways: by shunning all compromise, even a when it might help them achieve their most important goals; and when one left-wing group attacks another over small ideological differences or because they see them as insufficiently righteous, pushing away a natural ally.

Aspect 4: The Feeling of Emotional Truth

One further element runs through all the other aspects of narcissistic fantasies, and makes the fantasies even more persuasive, and easier to act on. This is *the feeling of emotional truth*, which says that my *feeling* that something is true means that it's true *in actual fact*—regardless of logic or contrary evidence. And the feeling that when something offends one's sense of how life *should* be, it simply *cannot* be true. The feeling of emotional truth is part and parcel of narcissistic fantasies and applies especially to the feelings of injury and rage that lie at the core of these fantasies.

I suggest that the feeling of emotional truth originates in a natural human instinct to push back when feeling narcissistically injured—forgotten or

dismissed as a human being, in one way or another. Being cast aside feels wrong, unjust, impossible to accept. Something in people refuses to be erased. At least part of us feels entitled to be seen, and to demand recognition, an apology, compensation, even *special* privileges—and maybe even revenge. Psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan (1953) pointed out long ago that anger is a wonderful antidote to helpless anxiety: rage intoxicates us with a sense of power, focus, and conviction that wipes away feelings of weakness, uncertainty, and helplessness; it enlivens us. "I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take this anymore" (from the film *Network* by Lumet, Gottfried & Caruso, 1976) is what we feel—a statement of defiance that nevertheless preserves the driving sense of injury. Narcissistic injury wipes away a sense of perspective and proportion (cf. Balint, 1979, e.g., pp. 19, 17, chap. 20)—it makes one's perceptions feel like truths and one's resentments feel righteous (cf. Reicher & Ulusahin, 2021; Wetts & Willer, 2018).

Political movements easily cohere around a shared feeling of injury— what Vamik Volkan (2001, 2021, pp. 146–148) calls chosen traumas—and of being entitled to compensation for it, whether the injury is truly devastating, or a minor loss of status or privilege for a group that remains demographically and politically dominant, like white American Christian men (e.g., Gabbatt, 2021; Reicher & Ulusahin, 2021). Brain-imaging studies show that grievance and resentment can even be addictive (Kimmel, 2020).

The sense of injury and victimization, and entitlement to turn the tables, lend themselves to simple story lines based on a paranoid split between characters who are all good or pure evil, and a schizoid dismissal of our enemy as subhuman. Manic triumph is justified as victory of the virtuous, and sadism as the punishment the villains deserve. The feeling of emotional truth infuses these stories with the warm certainty of righteousness.

Thrilling archetypal stories in which brave heroes, often on their own, stand up to more powerful, threatening malevolent forces carry a feeling of truth and meaning in their very structure, despite their lack of *inherent* content. We're all pulled in by such stories in books and movies, and we always identify with the designated good character facing a menacing evil—however well or poorly the facts of the fictional story correspond with real-world actualities. We are always David in these stories, always with God, whoever we really are and whatever we actually stand for, and our enemies are always Goliath—communist! capitalist! Jew! Muslim! Take your pick. And we need not listen to the fools and knaves on the other side. In the grip of these stories, listening, dialogue, and productive compromise cease to be options.

Finally, recall Ferenczi's (1932, 1933) insight that aggressors' self-serving hypocrisy immobilizes children's capacity to think for themselves. In the political sphere, hypocrisy is embedded in ideologies—stories, essentially—

that press people to submit to those in authority, however oppressive the authorities may be, and to doubt all contrary sources of influence. People may respond by becoming both irrationally trusting *and* unreasonably suspicious, depending on who's doing the talking and where that person stands in the simplistic narcissistic story line. Complexity in opponents' arguments, or self-reflection, or self-containment may be taken as evidence of lying. People fall back on believing only their own "gut"—meaning, the feelings and perceptions generated by the fantasy.

CONCLUSION: THE NARCISSISTIC POLITICS OF SUBMISSION

So, to sum up: certain economic and cultural changes in society, especially those where others benefit from one's own misfortune, cause many people to feel left behind, "dispossessed," humiliated, and alienated. Further, an economic system that *relies on* creating ongoing insecurity actively dispossesses many people. People react to this social trauma by identifying, submitting, and complying with some group's expectations, so they can regain a sense of belonging and value. But they also compensate for their loss of belonging, and for their sacrifice of autonomy, by developing exciting fantasies, generally authoritarian in nature, that seem to restore not only feelings of safety and belonging, but of specialness. Ironically, these fantasies *facilitate* compliance, by numbing people's more personal feelings and independent thinking, which could lead to dissent. The fantasies can be thought of as having three dynamics that work in concert to deny people's fears and vulnerabilities—sadomasochism; paranoid–schizoid organization; and the manic defense—and a fourth element: the feeling of emotional truth that follows narcissistic injury (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1947) and infuses the other dynamics with a sense of emotional power and righteousness. In the resulting heady haze of outraged entitlement, facts disappear, people misplace their humility, and they lose the capacity for sober consideration of the real-world consequences of their choices.

NOTES

1. Jay Frankel, PhD, is Associate Editor, and previously Executive Editor, of the journal *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*; co-author (with Neil Altman, Richard Briggs, Daniel Gensler, and Pasqual Pantone) of *Relational Child Psychotherapy* (2002, Other Press); co-editor (with Aleksandar Dimitrijevic and Gabriele Cassullo) of *Ferenczi's Influence on Contemporary Psychoanalytic Traditions* (2018, Routledge); and author of three dozen journal articles and book chapters, and numerous conference presentations and lectures,

on topics including trauma, identification with the aggressor, authoritarianism, the analytic relationship, the work of Sándor Ferenczi, play, child psychotherapy, relational psycho-analysis, and others.

2. "While the term was later popularized by Anna Freud (1936) as a mechanism of defense in which a victim of aggression copes with her helplessness by *becoming* an aggressor, it was originally introduced by Ferenczi (1933) to indicate *subordination* to an aggressor and identification with the particular victim role the aggressor expects. But the two phenomena are related; victims of aggression often *both submit* to an aggressor and *become* aggressors toward someone more vulnerable. Submission and aggression, in these very forms, are present in the authoritarian personality, as described by Adorno and his colleagues (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson & Sanford, 1950). And by identifying with the aggressor in Ferenczi's submissive sense, the victim also becomes an aggressor toward himself" (Frankel, 2019, pp. 199–200).

3. In more detail: Following David Harvey (2005), Gandesha (2018) details how the state of dispossession and insecurity is maintained through neoliberal policies of *privatization*, which restricts people's access to spaces, services, goods, and benefits whose availability may be crucial to the wellbeing of both individuals and society; *commodification*, which monetizes the natural world, treating it purely in terms of its potential to produce profit, and denying its personal, social, cultural, and spiritual value (in a broad sense, people are treated this way, too); *financialization*, which creates oppressive debt, often so people can pay for necessities that have been privatized, hobbling people's choices in life; *manufacturing perpetual political and economic crises* that "justify" abrogating people rights and interests; and state actions, like reducing both social-welfare benefits and taxes on the wealthy, that *redistribute wealth upward*.

    Consumer capitalism—also still going strong—adds a carrot to the stick of dispossession and betrayal. It stirs up constant excitement with promises that buying more and more things will bring happiness and quell the insecurity and inner emptiness that come from the loss of belonging and human solidarity (Peltz, 2005)—necessities for human society, *which this system itself has undermined* for the purpose of increasing demand (see Lasch, 1977, pp. 68, 72). The lure of instant gratification distracts people from their truer, deeper feelings and perceptions, and undermines individual and collective psychological development. And this excitement is stoked 24/7 by what Horkheimer and Adorno (1947), in 1944, called the "culture industry"—which our digital age of constant connectedness has intensified to the point where Giroux (2014) could call the US "a fully entertained population" embedded in a "culture of compliance" (p. 50). Narcissistic politics has escalated against the background of a culture and an economic system that have, for decades, certainly in the US, increasingly endorsed narcissistic values and fantasies (Lasch, 1977).

4. Cf. Marquez (2020) on "loyalty signaling," which requires self-abasement or other significant costs. Anti-vaxxers' and anti-maskers' risking their own and their loved ones' lives to a pandemic in order to demonstrate belonging certainly falls into this category.

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