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Title

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Journal

Global Societies Journal, 5(0)

Author

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Publication Date

2017

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First as Farce: Symbolic Politics and Donald Trump's Hands

Pablo Arias-Benavides^[1]

Abstract

The 2016 presidential primaries in the US featured a discussion of Donald Trump's hands. Trump was a leading candidate for the Republican party and ultimately went on to win the presidency. This study analyzes the public discourse around this issue through the content analysis of nine news publications. A semiotic theory of mythology and symbolic politics is employed alongside sociological and psychological interpretations of fascist movements to understand the ideological underpinnings of the 2016 Presidential election. Because of the US's central, hegemonic status in global politics, an understanding of the symbolic content and unconscious narratives which drive presidential elections is crucial to an understanding of emerging nationalist ideologies, governance, and culture. The language employed in presidential politics is an indicator of some of the cultural values and internal tensions characteristic of American society which are expressed through politics. Questions of libido, class, and gender -- particularly masculinity -- are raised by the results and addressed within this framework. The assertions of illegitimacy levelled against Trump, and his defenses, are seen to be predicated primarily on sexual power and also success in typically male endeavors, such as military or athletic contests. Distinctions of hierarchy and class are also strongly represented in the media dialogue surrounding the presidential primaries and Trump's candidacy. Metaphorical language involving attacks and defense replaces, in American politics, direct representations of the leader as soldier which were more typical of the fascist representations of Mussolini. Symbolic politics play a role in the collective representation and discussion of political figures. In contrast to the distortion and personalization inherent in symbolism and mythology, political language could operate on the basis of simple denotation, serving to foreground concrete policy and reduce the emphasis on individual characteristics.

Keywords

Symbolic politics, presidential elections, semiotics, fascism, Donald Trump.

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1. Introduction

Donald Trump's hands became a major topic of discussion during last year's Presidential primaries. The controversy began, according to *Vanity Fair*, as far back as 1988, when *Spy* magazine characterized Trump as a "short-fingered vulgarian" (Feirstein, 2015). Ideas of class and masculinity were combined in this symbol, with its reference to not only the phallus, but also to the stereotype of the long-fingered aristocrat. The classist disdain of the popular (*vulgaris*) has a long history, culminating in le Bon's theory of crowd psychology. This concept forms a foil to the more recognized, ultra-masculine component of fascism and national movements (Falasca-Zamponi, 2000: 22, 45). During the 2016 Republican primaries, Marco Rubio brought the "hands" discussion, now centered squarely on its phallic significance, to the debate stage, a maneuver that only strengthened Trump among his base. Overwhelmed, understandably, by the complexity of global politics and the hegemonic role of the US, the electorate was receptive to the implication that male genitalia, and in extension, masculine virility, is an important selection criterion. By removing politics from its own sphere of pragmatics, history, and economy, symbolic politics sets up personal criteria, such as masculinity or class-belonging, as the necessary conditions for eligibility to political office.

Content analysis of news publications based on this issue shows that Trump is a unique politician who combines aspects of the historical Fascist leaders and Žižek's absurd, yet dangerous figure. The meaning of the sign "Donald Trump's Hands" in the national consciousness can be explained with the hypothesis that the following terms will all be linked with

virility: competition, military, class, and capital. Virility will be the most referenced concept (signified) with the other four closely following. The aim is to determine whether or not the "sign" and its presence in the popular discourse is indicative of a particular set of values or semiotic system of symbolic politics (bourgeois-fascistic, populist, and gendered). According to Adorno (1982), and Falasca-Zamponi (2000), fascist values include the virility and military capability of the leader in contrast to the passivity of the populace. Mussolini, for example, articulated a "vision of the 'masses' as raw matter ... the conception of the 'masses' as female legitimized the guiding role of the political leader, the man" (Falasca Zamponi, 2000: 23). Privera and Howard (2006) argue that a gendered symbolic politics will use similar terms, and Anand (2007) shows that an overlap occurs in the explanation (by participants) of a violent populist uprising in Gujarat. If my hypothesis is true, and the "hands" sign is (1) contested as an indicator of sexual virility and (2) related to class, military, capital, and competition (again, as a sign of masculine capability), we can conclude that (3) the "hands" sign can only refer to political eligibility in a system of meaning which has depoliticized politics and transposed political discourse to the realm of mythology – a system of signs which has, in the past, been used to legitimate fascist, populist, and violent regimes.

In symbolic politics, mythological speech is used to indicate belonging to a category. Such belonging, rather than an account of rigorous political activity, is taken as the necessary condition of eligibility for office. Although the small hands, or more properly, short fingers, sign was first meant to indicate Trump's exclusion from the aristocratic class to

which politics is sometimes imagined to rightfully belong, it was transformed into an indicator of masculine virility. Contrary to damaging Trump's campaign, such a lexical transposition allowed him to pivot towards a figure which is far more universal, and invested with a libidinal charge – that of the archaic 'great father.' Of course, this figure is not unique to psychoanalytic interpretations but is also well recognized in the field of anthropology as the 'big man' style of leadership. As far back as Aristotle, the patriarchal family has been seen as a basis for state organization (Fried, 1967: 82-85).

The way to dismantle support for the virile leader may be to challenge them in their sexual potency, an essential component of their appeal. An alternative strategy is to relocate political discourse from the realm of connotation and mythology to a proper political sphere of strict denotation and first-order significations. In other words, our civil conversation, in order to avoid nationalism, populism, and patriarchy, should focus on examining the relationships of production and material circumstances of the society in order to generate concrete problems and solutions. Just as de Beauvoir (1960) observes that a woman is not born, but made, the populace is constructed in a way that makes it susceptible to argument on the level of the unconscious. Forced into passivity, the idle subjects must allow and depend on another to seize control; they have been convinced that they are ineffective. The way to disrupt such a seizure is not to limit the sphere of activity of the other by stricter categorization, but in the reclamation of transcendence for all subjects despite the social ordering of categorizations, as de Beauvoir envisioned. As she writes, transcendence is the ability and privilege of understanding that one may "develop different institutions, another ethic, a new legal code...to transcend what is, [to

regard] history as a becoming." (de Beauvoir, 1960: p. 601). We must return from the self-orientation and interest of the *base bourgeois* to the universal and ideal conception of the *citoyen*. Symbolic politics is tilted dangerously towards the side of ethno-nationalists, patriarchs, and the capitalist classes, because society has been structured along these lines and language has followed. This phenomenon can be observed globally, not just in the US or even the West, because the "great father" has remained in the position of centrality in relation to which all other signifiers are arrayed and find their meaning.

1.1 Global Significance

The material conditions obscured by the rhetoric of the 2016 elections are stark indeed. The US is facing economic and social crises on a global scale, which have "opened a rift within the ruling class over US geopolitical strategy." There is a "widespread impression that its diminishing global power...is the source of all the pain and hardship endured by the lower middle and working classes." (Bellamy Foster, 2017). This pain is inescapably concrete. Reports show that "the number of jobs in manufacturing has declined by 7,231,000 – or 37 percent – since ...1979," and that median household income for householders with a high-school education has dropped by "\$15,694 – or 27.8 percent" (Jeffrey, 2015). Industrial production has shifted "from the global North to the global South, where about 70 percent of industrial production now takes place, as opposed to around 50 percent in 1980" (Bellamy Foster 2017). This shift has not ensured prosperity, however, in the global South, as Oxfam reported in early 2017 that "just eight individuals, all men, own as much wealth as the poorest half of the world's population... [and that] if the data had been available

before, it would have shown that in 2016 nine people owned the same as the 3.6 billion who make up the poorest half of humanity” (Hirschler, 2017). By some accounts, “the neoliberal era since the 1980s has been associated with the steepest increases in inequality in recorded history” (Bellamy Foster, 2017). Trump’s representations of himself as politician suggest that economic troubles can be solved by a strong man who will be tougher on China (Lanktree, 2017). He characterized TPP negotiations as a “rape” of “our country,” which he has construed as a vulnerable, feminine body in need of his virile protection (Cirilli and Knowles, 2016). Such solutions do not address structural issues, but rather encourage other states to adopt either protectionist or more aggressive trade policies, potentially worsening the crisis.

In the context of this crisis in global capitalism, the US presidential election carries global significance. Toughness and virility are not solutions to these problems, but the presence of a figure like Trump in the White House could lead to a sense of permissiveness towards similarly ultra-masculine and authoritarian leaders. A recent profile of Rodrigo Duterte, president of the Philippines, in *Vox*, notes that despite comparing himself to Hitler and bearing responsibility for “a violent crackdown on the nation’s drug-dealers that has killed more than 7,000 people” some of whom he has “boasted about personally executing,” he was invited to the White House after Trump’s election. If an individual who responds to accusations of human rights violations with “a two-word reply: Fuck you,” is received as a guest of the US president, “the American human rights bully pulpit disintegrates into ash.” Duterte, like Trump, has made jokes relating to sexual violence against women (Santos, 2017).

Instead of rethinking the imperialist initiatives and US support for dictators that drove the US into war in Iraq and Afghanistan, Trump presented the long wars in the Middle East as, also, amenable to resolution by force of personality. “If Saddam and Gaddafi were still in power,” he wondered in a 2015 interview, “you think things would be more stable? ... of course it would be” (Stevenson, 2015). In reference to North Korea, Trump suggested that the US should aid Japan and South Korea in obtaining nuclear weapons to counterbalance the threat (Rafferty, 2016). On relations with Russia, Trump stated in a Republican debate that Putin “has absolutely no respect for President Obama. Zero... I would get along with him... I think I will get along with Putin, and I will get along with others, and we will have a much more stable world” (Ontheissues.org, 2015).

Trump’s affinity for authoritarian politics is further reflected in his comments on the French presidential election, which occurred several months after his eventual victory. Trump supported candidate Marie le Pen (Quigley, 2017). Le Pen is a politician who has generated controversy by denying French responsibility for the arrest and deportation of 13,000 Jewish people from France to Auschwitz in WWII (Katz, 2017). She has also been accused of ties to Nazi sympathizers through her connection to her father and founder of the French National Front, Jean-Marie le Pen. Trump’s cabinet, since his election, has included Sebastian Gorka, a “top terrorism advisor to Trump,” who has become infamous as a member of “Vitezi Rend, an anti-Semitic, quasi-Nazi Hungarian national group.” Several officers of the group have stated that “Gorka is a sworn member,” and he has appeared in public wearing a medal associated with the group (Graham, 2017).

The US has a well-recognized hegemonic role in world politics. It is crucial

to examine the psychological factors driving Trump's campaign and election in order to understand the influence it may have around the world. US permissiveness towards human rights abuses, Nazi sympathies, and military-interventionist policies will create a situation of precarity that will be felt around the world. Leaders like Duterte will be even less concerned about interventions by the UN or other supra-national bodies. The global nuclear arms race may be further accelerated by Trump's comments and his apparent policy of proliferation. For all of these reasons, the factors contributing to Trump's success have relevance in the topics of global governance, hegemony, human rights, and ideology.

2. Literature Review

As outlined above, this study draws on a range of interdisciplinary sources for its theoretical framework. This body of work shows the connections between politics, language, and unconscious drives. Through mythological language, politics reaches the personal and pretends that there is an inherent link between the two spheres of social life. The following texts provide an introduction to semiology, mythological speech, and symbolic politics, and relate these to fascist movements. This article is concerned with questions of gender, psychology, and class theory, synthesized with other topics by the work of Adorno and Falasca-Zamponi, and includes also two contemporary, parallel examples of gendered political discourse.

2.1 Semiotics and Symbolic Politics

Semiology as a discipline can be traced to de Saussure's linguistic theory of signs (1959). De Saussure contends that the linguistic unit of analysis of language (*langue*) should be the sign, which is

subdivided into the acoustic-image (*signifier*) and the concept which is referenced (*signified*). The relationship between signifier and signified is completely arbitrary, but the signifier only acquires meaning when it is 'filled in' by the signified - the sign is therefore an *empty category* until it is read by an observer who understands the connection between the signifier and signified. Barthes took up this theory of signs in many works, including *Myth Today* (2013: 1972:215-274). He claims that there is a category of speech - mythology - which is a second-order semiological system. This means that the signifier of mythological speech is the sign, not as empty category, but as it is read by one who understands the language; that is, the signifier in mythological speech carries a *denotation* (the common sense meaning) in and of itself, as well as a *connotation* (the way the meaning is presented and therefore construed) which it acquires when read in conjunction with its signified *concept*. For Barthes, speech (*parole*) is not limited to the utterance but includes gestures, and especially in mythological speech, images. Mythological speech introduces a distortion in the original meaning - a sign which has a clear denotation is now *appropriated* to connote another. We must read such second-order speech, not on the level of signs, but on the level of connotation. We can deconstruct the compound, mythological sign or *form* to leave the *meaning* (connotation or concept) as the remainder, since the "sign" of myth is composed of the first-order sign of the *langue* (made up of signifier, signified, and their unification) as signifier and a concept or connotation as the signified. As in psychoanalysis, the "true" meaning is in the second-order interpretation rather than the first-level symptom.

Hedetoft links such mythological speech to politics under the heading of symbolic politics (2007). He draws on

Umberto Eco rather than referencing de Saussure or Barthes, but gives a theory of signs and claims, like Barthes, that mythological speech serves to naturalize historical circumstances. Crucially, Hedetoft points out that this ‘naturalization’ is especially deployed to obscure the non-identity of state and nation by suggesting that they are inextricably tied – de-politicizing the state and extracting the ideal concept of a nation from the populace. Symbolic politics is concerned with the preparation of “transformations... by convincing the national or ethnic public that political leaders can be trusted with coping with such challenges and that the identity of the national community and its culture will be in the best possible hands” (Hedetoft, 2007: 594). Five “moves” are outlined by Hedetoft, the most relevant being the second, which seeks to “*humanize and personalize* political methods [whereby] structural and impersonal relations are represented in the form of interpersonal problems... or when political actors are required to display charismatic qualities rather than political ideas and problem-solving initiatives” (Hedetoft, 2007: 596). Trump’s hands can thus be read as a symbol of interpersonal problems of class identity and belonging, competitive and sexual capability (virility), and as an indicator of charismatic quality. In *Spy* magazine and *Vanity Fair*, the insult serves to separate Trump from the presumably long-fingered class of elite society, shown by the consistent pairing of ‘short fingered’ and ‘vulgarian.’ The sexual connotation is shown by Trump’s response to the slur when he stated that “small hands... implied that ‘something else must be small’” (Poniewozik, 2016). The move to foreground such character and anatomical features is a humanization and personalization of politics which, as Hedetoft states, serves to sideline issues of

politics *per se* and transposes political discourse to the realm of connotation and mythological speech outlined above.

2.2 The Psychology of Populism and Fascism

To understand the politics of national identity and second-order systems of meaning, we turn to a Marxist psychoanalytic reading of fascism by Adorno (1982) and a work on the aesthetic component of fascist power by Falasca-Zamponi (2000). A more contemporary take on symbolic politics is shown in a study by Anand (2007) on the 2002 massacre of Muslim Indians in Gujarat, and a rhetorical analysis of news coverage by Prividera and Howard (2006). In all of these texts, male sexual power takes a central role as a signifier in mythological speech connoting political power and national identity. Adorno’s analysis also includes a bourgeois class component.

Adorno seeks to unravel the “devices” of fascist propaganda to reveal its meaning - a meaning, once again, which is not hidden, but distorted. Because of the structural similarity between semiotic readings and psychoanalytic interpretation, outlined above, it is appropriate to include Adorno’s findings as part of this study. Like Falasca-Zamponi, Adorno references le Bon’s theory of crowds, and follows Freud’s inquiry regarding the transformation of the “individual” into a “mass” (in le Bon’s terminology, a “crowd”) (Adorno, 1951: 120). He argues that there must be a libidinal source for the bonding and that the leader must fill the position of the “all-powerful and threatening primal father,” and that this identification is the “ultimate root of the otherwise enigmatic *personalization* of fascist propaganda, its incessant plugging of names and supposedly great men” (Adorno 1951, p. 124). Identification

between the leader and mass must encompass such transference as well as narcissistic self-love; the leader must maintain a “resemblance to ham actors and asocial psychopaths ... the superman must still resemble the follower and appear as his ‘enlargement’ ... the ‘great little man’ ... the idea that he is just one of the folks, a plain, red-blooded American” (Adorno 1951, p. 127). Such a relationship, because it does not “recognize any spiritual criterion” uses instead “a pseudo-natural criterion such as the race” (Adorno 1951: 129).

Here, Adorno follows Reich, who states that “the economic situation is not directly and immediately converted into political consciousness[;] if that were the case, the social revolution would have been here long ago...the social economic explanation does not hold up...when a man’s thought and action *are inconsistent with* the economic system, are irrational” (Reich, 1970 – 1946: 19-20). Such irrationality creates a de-politicizing selection process for leaders, which, Adorno argues, can only serve a system with irrational ends like fascism. Its measure is libidinal rather than political. This irrationality constitutes the necessity of the regression of the individual to a “mass” psychology and the transposition of the individual from a realm of meaning which privileges them to one which recognizes only supreme authority – for Freud, the antediluvian era of the “great father.” In such a realm, only the leader can hold authority, and all other male subjects exist in a state of mutual repression and simultaneous adulation of the leader. The similarities between the male subject and the leader encourage role-play fantasies where the subject identifies with the free action and power of the leader, and thus eases the strain of repression. Once again, this is the realm of mythology and psychoanalysis - the plane of second-order systems of meaning.

Falasca-Zamponi’s analysis shows some important contrasts to Adorno’s in the interpretation of fascist ends, but also emphasizes the identification between the mass and the leader. In this reading, the leader again assumes the role of primitive *ubermensch* or primal father, and the mass – here a feminine object to be molded by the great artist-politician – receives a measure of “virility” through identification with the leader. Falasca-Zamponi notes, “only as a whole and under the guidance of the leader [Mussolini,] did the ‘masses’ show virility...only the politician could transform the female ‘masses’ into warriors (Falasca-Zamponi, 2000: 40). She points out that the national myth was central to Mussolini’s Italy, so that even while the ends may have been rational, the means were still semiotic-mythological (Falasca-Zamponi, 2000: 25). Fascist politics at the time looked for the arrival of the “‘new man,’ the future leader of the masses ... [who would establish] a novel relationship founded on emotions and the power of myth” (Falasca-Zamponi, 2000: 45), a man characterized as an athlete and soldier *par excellence*. An admiring contemporary description hailed Mussolini as reminiscent of “Nietzsche’s conception,” “a *condottiero*, a hero... ‘father of the country,’ ‘the man-creator’” (Falasca-Zamponi, 2000: 55). Several of these characteristics are encapsulated in the values of “virility,” “military,” and “competition,” which this study’s analysis codes for.

2.3 Masculinity in Political Discourse

Masculinity has been recognized by many scholars as an important quality for presidential candidates. Edwards (2007) states that “the modern presidential campaign is a ritual that expresses the heroic myth...in which masculine-identified constructs are valorized.” Duerst-Lahti (2008) sees “the presidency and its selection

processes as deeply raced and gendered,” and examines the 2008 Democratic primary as an opportunity to “illuminate what has always been.” The 2016 primaries, and the ‘Trump’s hands’ sign, further demonstrate the potency of male identity in US politics.

Prividera and Howard provide a useful example of rhetorical analysis, as well as a characterization of the “male” and “female” archetypes deployed in the mythological language of contemporary US mass media. Here, too, there is a connection between military prowess, competitive ability, and masculinity as the characteristics of the active, male national ideal, in contrast to the passive, supporting and ineffectual (distressed) character of the female component of national identity - what Falasca-Zamponi might term the feminine “mass” or “crowd.” Prividera and Howard characterize the male “warrior-hero” archetype as virile, enterprising, and capable, inspiration for the coding values of “virility,” and “military” terminology. Anand’s ethnographic study of the Gujarat massacre also shows a clear link between sexual virility and political power. In an absurd reality, the Republican primary debates end with open, but still rhetorical, comparisons of genitalia; Anand discusses witness reports of the butchers of Gujarat exposing themselves as proof of their virile supremacy. This image from Anand’s text, which invites comparison to the “Trump’s hands” sign, shows that the butchers linked their violent power to the generative power of their penises. Further, Anand shows that “specific uses of words emphasise the greater ‘manhood’ of Hindus as represented by the bigger penis [...]. The homoerotic (anti-)desire for Muslim men is translated into emasculation of Muslim men through their ‘arses’ [...]. The riots of 2002 therefore can be seen as clarifying who is a ‘fucker’ (and hence masculine and superior) and who is ‘fucked’ (emasculated and inferior)”

(Anand, 2007: 265). We have coded such clarification under ‘hierarchy,’ or in one case, ‘abuse,’ and this kind of emasculation can be read from Trump’s characterization of his opponent as “little Marco” (Chavez and Stracqualursi, 2016) and his assertion that he would not “take it,” in reference to what he perceived as verbal abuse.

2.4 Tragedy or Farce?

Finally, Žižek suggests in his 2009 book, “First as Tragedy, Then as Farce,” the arrival of a new kind of politician. Using a term popularized in the 80s in reference to Ronald Reagan (Lanoue, 1989), he introduces the “teflon president,” a figure impervious to criticism because they have abandoned the “dignity of classical politics” for a “post-Oedipal,” “post-modern” form where they are “no longer even expected to stick consistently to [an] electoral program.” This figure mixes “spontaneously naive outbursts with the most ruthless manipulation,” they are a politician without the accustomed dignity of public office – the “base *bourgeois*” in contrast to the “ideal sphere of the *citoyen*” (Žižek, 2009: 49). Here it seems likely that Žižek is invoking the Hegelian concept of the citizen who “acquires his ethical dignity in transcending himself toward the universal” in contrast to the “private sphere” of the bourgeois oriented towards “desire and pleasure” (de Beauvoir, 1960: 613). Žižek’s example is the former Italian Prime Minister Berlusconi. Such a leader “embodies or enacts the myth” of the common individual, in Berlusconi’s case, the “average Italian” whose “grandiose enactment of a noble politician...is more like a ridiculously operatic poor man’s dream of greatness.” Rather than the “ideal sphere of the *citoyen*” invoked formerly, this type of politician willingly embraces “the conflict of selfish

interests which characterize the bourgeois” (Žižek, 2009: 49-50).

Like Adorno’s Fascist leader, this leader constitutes the “return of the repressed...the manner in which the effort to control sexuality sexualizes this controlling activity itself.” Žižek proposes a magical “*fetishistic* dimension of populism” which latches onto an object or representation to allay the basic problem of modern democratic politics: the inability of the subject to rationally grasp the huge complexity of the field they are invited to participate in. Such a representation is substituted for explanation; Žižek terms this “the symbolic efficacy of illusions, the way they regulate activity which generates social reality” (Žižek, 2009:78). In US politics, the ‘fetish’ has become the hands of Donald Trump, and the ‘rational’ issues being obscured by ‘illusions’ involve the decline in manufacturing and the increasing inequality of wealth distribution outlined above, amidst a host of other factors. In many ways, Žižek, like Adorno, is following a line of analysis originating with Reich, since for Reich, “sexuality occupied a central position in the development and workings of human subjectivity as enmeshed within...patriarchal capitalism, it necessarily constituted the key problem for psychology and social activism as well” (King, 1992). The sexuality in this case need not involve concupiscent desire *per se*, but rather intense admiration which evokes role-playing – Adorno’s enlargement and exaggeration of the common man.

All of these texts support the claim that politics is not always a rational endeavour. Rather, political activity is dominated by a system of signs which operates on the second level of meaning – interpretation rather than simple signification. Mythological speech is the foundation of symbolic politics and relies on the idealization of the concepts, “state,”

“nation,” “leader,” and “subject-populace-mass.” However, scholarly treatments of Trump’s campaign are only beginning to be published, the exception being a notable entry by Bellamy Foster in the Monthly Review (2017). Therefore, a study which employs these analytical foundations can be a significant contribution to scholarship in the fields of global studies, political science, and sociology. The sign, ‘Trump’s hands,’ operates on a mythological level and as a fetish which replaces political acumen with “masculine” values (virility, militarism, competition, capitalist pursuits) This dynamic dominated the primaries and carried into the general election. A simple bodily trait is read as a sign of class belonging, the wedge which divides the elite status quo from the populist grass-roots. Adoption of such a sign signals the abandonment of the “ideal sphere of the *citoyen*,” paradoxically either elite, or marginal, for the realm of the popular. In Mussolini’s imagination, this distinction was between the aristocratic, male soldier-aesthete, and the feminine ‘crowd’ or ‘mass,’ which was considered a psychological regression of the individual (Falasca-Zamponi, 2000: 44, 89-90). In a contemporary setting, such a construction no longer exists in the same form, but the American populace is still adopting a mythological language of patriarchy.

In this case, the leader is construed as the “base bourgeois” because the public has allowed the national mythology of unbridled self-interest to be represented in the office of the Presidency. Although Adorno rejects Leon Trotsky’s identification of fascism (1996: 1944) with bourgeois class struggle in the historical period, populism in this day must find its roots in bourgeois sentiments of class, and more particularly, masculinity. An analysis of the mythological language used in the primary debates and particularly in the conversation surrounding

Trump's hands, can show that the US is, indeed, in a period of populist politics driven by unconscious mechanisms which is likely to encourage similar movements around the world. This can be an impetus for the restoration of political action to the realm of the conscious and rational.

3. Methods

My method involved selecting and then coding news articles referencing "Donald Trump's hands" as a discrete semiological sign. I used the Proquest database to search three publications, The New York Times, Los Angeles Times, and the Wall Street Journal. From there, I broadened my search to include other terms related to Trump, and ended with a selection of 17 articles from a variety of publications. In the end, I decided to eliminate all but 9, which directly referenced the "hands" sign.

Next, I outlined 13 coding values which are included in the Appendix. These were drawn partly from Prividera and Howard's 2006 study, which designated certain concepts as belonging to "male" or "female" archetypes in the public consciousness of the US, and partly from my own hypotheses about the significations (concepts) included under the sign of the "hands." Using Nvivo software, I captured each article as a PDF file and manually coded it by selecting passages of text which referred to the values. I remained open to emergent codes. One *a-priori* value, that of "supporter," did not show up explicitly in any of the articles, but two related concepts did - "enabler," and "magic," (both are included in the Appendix). Therefore, "supporter" was replaced with "enabler," which has a slightly different denotation. "Animal" imagery was not expected but emerged from two of the texts.

Storing this coding within an Nvivo project automatically tabulates the number of references, which objects they were selected from, and how many distinct objects they were made in. Using this data, an example of which is also included in the appendix, I will determine the frequency of each coding value as the cumulative frequency across all the objects. I will also determine how many objects each value appears in, *ie* which is the most common, not in number of references, but in number of objects that reference it. This will allow me to determine which significations are indicated by the signifier in quantitative terms.

4. Results

My theoretical framework led me to believe that virility would be the most referenced coding term, with class, capital, competition, and military clustered alongside or close behind it. Chart I shows that, in terms of frequency, 'virility' is the most represented coding value, with 43 references. 'Class' is second, with 40, 'military' third, with 38, and competition fourth, 32. Capital is far behind, despite my hypothesis, with 20 references. Insecurity is more referenced than capital, with 22, but as the chart shows, the top four values dominated across all sources. This statistic seems to confirm Foster's comment that there is a pervasive feeling of uneasiness linked to the declining fortunes of the lower and middle classes in the US.

Considering presence rather than frequency, as illustrated in Chart II, 'hierarchy' is the only term coded for in all nine sources. 'Competition' is present in eight out of nine, and many values were clustered close behind at seven - 'virility,' 'passivity,' 'military,' 'insecurity,' 'class,' and 'capital.' 'Gender' is only referenced

explicitly in four of the sources; the general concept of sexual power coded for by 'virility' is much better represented, both in frequency and presence. Although 'hierarchy' dominated in terms of presence, it is listed only half as frequently as 'competition,' a similar value.

5. Discussion

These data broadly confirm my thesis, with the exception that 'capital' is not clustered with 'class,' 'military,' and 'competition' in terms of number of references; these terms did form a cluster in terms of presence across sources. Two values which Prividera and Howard (2006) identified with femininity ('insecurity,' and 'passivity,') were present in seven out of nine of the sources, as many as all but two of the other values, but with the fifth and sixth places, respectively, in terms of references.

A future study could include more samples, a broader range of coding values, and several coders to reinforce the significance of the data. Such a study could elaborate on other aspects of Trump's politics which mirror historical fascism – xenophobia, racism, the suppression of journalism and science, preference for the private sector. The clustering of values by both measures seems to indicate that there is overlap between some of the coding values which can be elaborated upon - for example, 'hierarchy,' and 'competition,' are closely related concepts. This may be the cause for 'hierarchy' being placed at the top when results are indexed by presence but near the bottom when indexed by number of references.

Sexual libido, 'virility,' is the most prevalent concept when ordered by references, and among the most prevalent when ordered by presence, and this was the

expected result. 'Class' also placed high in both measures. This seems to confirm my hypothesis that the 'small hands' sign had significations of both class and libido. Together with the class aspects of his campaign, it seems that Trump's style – and his lines up with Adorno's Freudian interpretation of populist politics – relies on libidinal charge as an engine of political power. These results have helped me to understand how Trump, as a billionaire, could feign the representation of the working classes - their identification is unconscious and therefore not rational. Trump's hands are ultimately a signifier for the exercise of power in general; this signifier is tied up in a web of meaning which includes sport, military, class, and sexual signs. All of these signs, however, are reducible to the signification of personal-individual power.

5.1 What makes a leader?

The figure of politician in our country's rhetorical discourse, therefore, is defined first by sexual energy and then by aptitude in typically male and soldierly endeavours, what the Greeks would define as *arete* (Wolfe, 2003: 636). What is lacking in Trump, which Falasca-Zamponi considered the generative principle of fascist power as embodied by Mussolini, is the mythology of the leader as *aesthete* and supreme artist (Falasca-Zamponi, 2000: 10-26). However, like the representation of Mussolini given by Falasca-Zamponi, the ideal politician of the US is envisioned as a kind of athlete-soldier *ubermensch*. This identification is not through outward signs such as military service and decoration, for example, or participation in the Olympics, but through mythological identifications of language. The politician *attacks*, *defends*, and engages in *counterattack*, but only in the realm of rhetoric. Playing a few rounds of

golf represents ‘competition’ and athletic achievement. A constant dynamic of hierarchical ranking is crucial to the rhetoric of Trump as well as his opponents. The “little hands” sign is meant to place Trump at the bottom of an arbitrary hierarchical order linked, in the national imagination, to ideas of masculinity as well as class. Trump’s response is to produce an alternative, yet equally arbitrary ranking between himself and “little Marco,” where he occupies the higher position.

The leader is not drawn from the populace at large. ‘Class’ distinctions are necessary to the work of politics; our imaginations are still locked into the discourse of crowds and crowd psychology. It seems that at least a portion of the public in the US considers some kind of separation from the *vulgar* as a necessary condition to rule; the prevalence of ‘class’ terminology in our study supports this idea. In Trump’s case, this is a complex issue. Clearly separated from the populace by his wealth, Trump is distinguished from other portions of the elite - the references to class highlighted in our sources are disparagements of Trump rather than affirmations.

All this fits neatly with Adorno’s analysis of fascism, wherein the leader must mirror the common “man” without actually being considered part of the same category. Leon Trotsky (1996: 1944) claimed that the success of fascism was a product of the bourgeois in reaction against both working-class insurgencies and elite domination; it seems that Trump’s candidacy could fit this model in conjunction with Adorno’s. Trotsky claims that the “genuine basis (for fascism) is the petty bourgeoisie,” because “the economically powerful big bourgeoisie ... must ensure a definite mutual relationship with the petty bourgeoisie and, through its mediation, with the proletariat ... the magnates of finance capital are unable,

by *their* force alone, to cope with the proletariat” (Trotsky 1996: 1944, p. 8, pp. 25-27). Indeed, a recent article in Monthly Review points out that “Trump’s electoral support came mainly ... from the lower middle class and privileged sections of the working class ... [he] received a plurality of votes among those with incomes between \$50,000 and \$200,000 a year,” and “the white vote and the male vote by decisive margins.” A Gallup report cited in the same piece “pointedly observed” similarities in voting patterns in the elections of Hitler and Trump, who, like Mussolini, relied on the support of the “petty bourgeoisie” (Bellamy Foster, 2017). Several notable scholars cited in the article warn of a neo-fascist trend in American politics, including Richard Falk, who warns of a “pre-fascist moment,” and Cornel West, who characterizes neo-fascism as “an American-style form of fascism” (*Democracy Now!* Dec. 1 2016).

Considering the close parallelisms between Trump’s movement and historical fascism, in both the demographic structures of support and the psychological underpinnings of the movement, it is not hyperbolic to compare “Trumpist” politics to historical fascism. Of course, circumstances have changed and the fascism of today will not mirror precisely the form that emerged in the 1930s and 40s; this is ample reason to be keenly aware of further developments.

5.2 *Bourgeois or Citoyen?*

This paper has set up an opposition, following Žižek, between the ‘base bourgeois’ and the citizen-‘citoyen.’ In our ideal conception, the citizen is considered outside the categories of class, gender, or physical power, while the bourgeois relies on these categories to justify its position as enforcer and overseer, in a word, as ‘middle-class.’ In this sphere, the worst aspects of populism and authoritarianism are merged:

male authority, justification by military might, and the characterization of the populace as an inert mass to be shaped and then protected - a feminine body defined by 'insecurity,' and 'passivity' (Falasca-Zamponi, 2000: 24; Privera and Howard, 2004). Demythologization of our politics might entail something like the technocratic ideal of mechanical selection by merit – the removal of politics from the personal realm to which it has been transposed. Obviously such a process is also profoundly anti-democratic and must be defined by some authority. Rather, the best hope for the democratic ideal would simply be a mythological language which foregrounds those values necessary to broad political participation: equity in material conditions, mutual aid, equality in society and before the law, and a high standard of education. Regarding the symbolic charge of the Trump campaign and the sign in particular – Donald Trump's hands –our conclusion is that this system of meaning is not very much advanced from that of fascism's last resurgence in the 1940's. More research analyzing the symbolic elements of Trump's

presidency should be a priority for the humanities and social sciences, since his election, at least in this author's view, is confirmation that a symbolic politics based on violent masculinity and dominance, is now, more than ever, the order of the day.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge Drs. Falasca-Zamponi and Cruz of the Department of Sociology at UCSB, for their instruction in French Social Theory and Cultural Theory. Dr. Patterson of the Writing department, and Messrs. Andrew Johnson and Mark Jay, graduate students in the departments of Political Science and Sociology, respectively, gave generous aid in revising and expanding upon this article.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

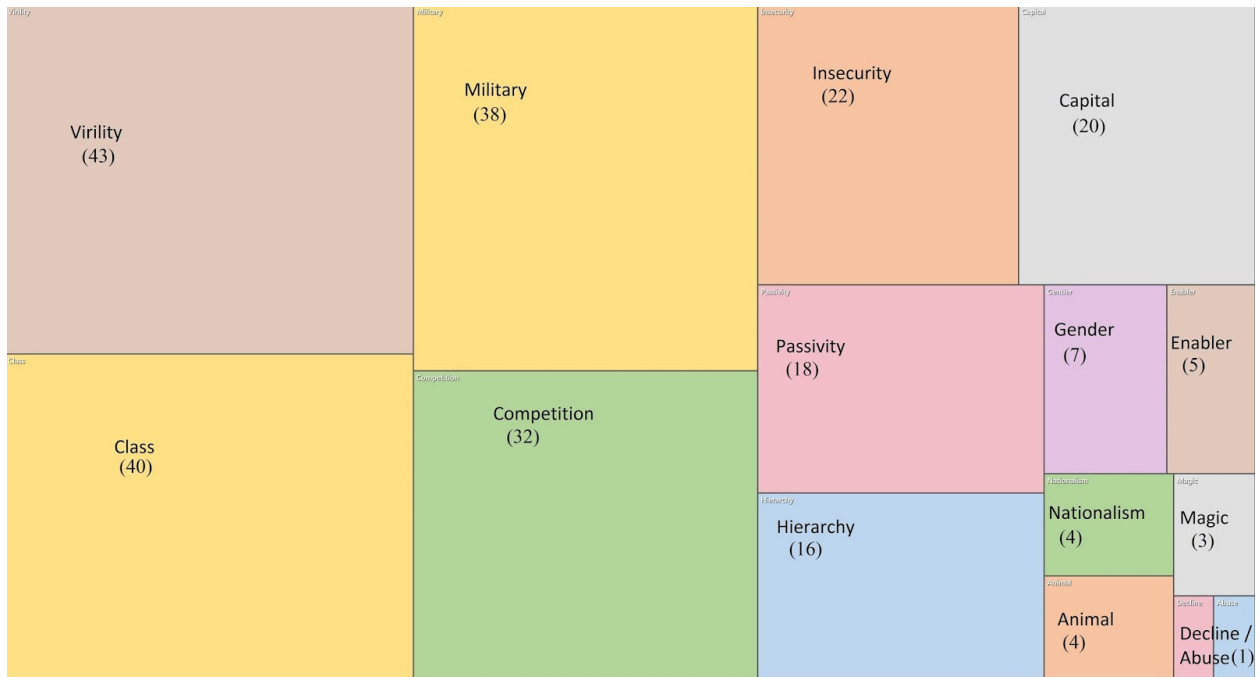


Figure 1 – Coding Values by Frequency

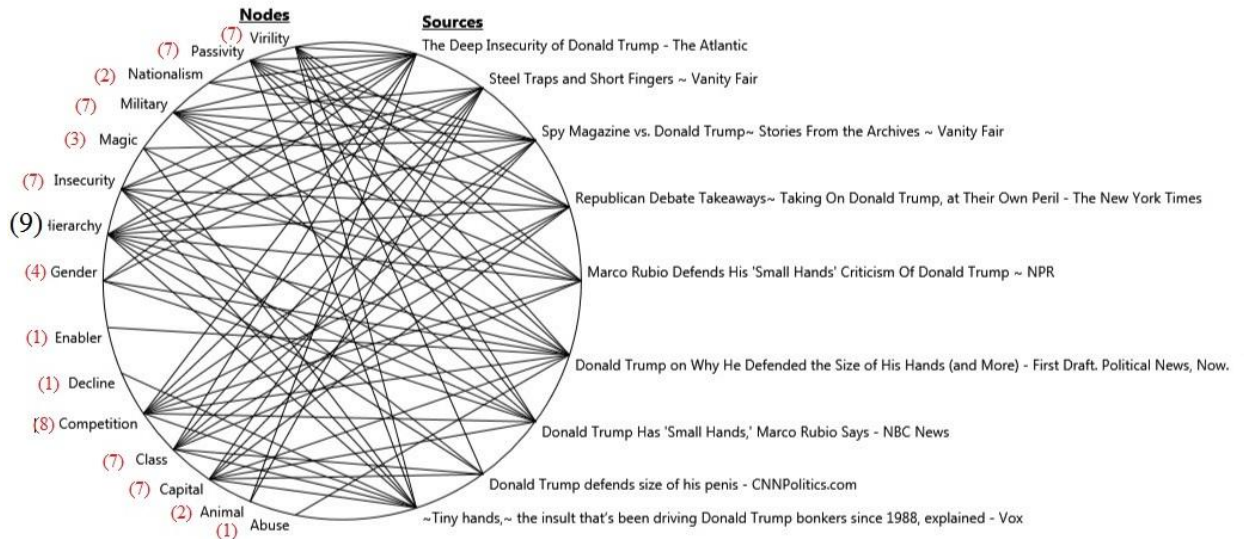


Figure 2 – Coding Values by Presence

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Appendix A: Coding Values

1. Virility - General references to sexual potency, sexual innuendo, references to genitalia (excepting the specific sign ‘manhood,’ which was included in gender)
2. Class - References to behavioral standards or other methods of determining insider/outsider status among the political class and civic society.
3. Military - Words deriving from military maneuvers: attack, defense, assault, retreat, etc. References to the military in general.
4. Competition - Words deriving from sports, gambling, or competitive games. References to competitive ability.
5. Insecurity - References to personal insecurity or neurosis, as well as national (social) insecurities.
6. Capital - References to wealth, capitalist endeavours in real estate or enterprise, etc.
7. Passivity - Implications that a subject has taken a passive role in interactions (and especially altercations).
8. Hierarchy - Words which denote ranked categories, references to or claims about a subject’s place in such an order.
9. Gender - Explicit references to gender or the subject’s gendered quality : ‘manhood,’ ‘femininity.’
10. Enabler - Began as ‘supporter,’ as in the feminine archetype outlined by Privera and Howard (2006). Changed to “enabler,” in the process of emergent coding because it was the signifier used when the supporter archetype was invoked.
11. Animal - Also included as part of emergent coding, two articles included animal imagery.
12. Nationalism - References to the national ideal, personification of such an ideal, indications of the “national character,” exhortations based on attachment to the national ideal.
13. Magic - Another term from emergent coding, three articles used signs linked to magic. This term was also separated from “supporter” because the connotation was negative (in terms of curses, witchcraft, etc. rather than magical protection).
14. Abuse - References to being ‘abused,’ ‘taken advantage of,’ etc. May have a connotation of sexual abuse as outlined by Anand (2007).

15. Decline - References to national decline and appeals to restoration or rescue, also as suggested by Privera and Howard (2006).

Appendix B: Sample References

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