

Pussynomics: regression to mean

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“He’s a poor person’s idea of a rich person. They see him. They think, ‘If I were rich, I’d have a fabulous tie like that. Why are my ties not made of 400 acres of polyester?’ All that stuff he shows you in his house – the gold faucets – if you won the lottery, that’s what you’d buy” (Leibowitz, 2016).

The world knows this American president for crude sexist/sexual declarations, compulsive pathological lying, and friendships with racists, homophobes and anti-semites. So what? Plenty of liars, bigots and skirt chasers have called the White House home. Still he’s terrifying, conjuring dread as surely as the Bates Motel in Hitchcock’s *Psycho*. Donald Trump – salesman, TV huckster and sexual predator – triggers primitive, infantile fears. From his freebie media campaign to his policies and executive orders he fuels a fear so intense that it works through denial. The hellfire and brimstone, glitzy gaudy glamor, tough love concoction that is Donald Trump, masks fears – harbored by many, not just those for whom the economy is not working – that our beloved caretakers, upon whom we depend for our daily survival, will not deliver. What explains the appeal of a man who believes that, “if this country gets any kinder or gentler, it’s literally going to cease to exist” (Trump, 1990).

Right wing populism as fundamentalist religion

“The point is that you can’t be too [greedy](#)” (Trump, 1987, p. 47).

Between 1987 and 1995 The American Academy of Sciences sponsored the interdisciplinary “Fundamentalism Project”. Studying fundamentalist religions all over the world, scholars “concluded that, regardless of the religion, fundamentalism has several commonalities”. These are:

- Men are to lead and women and children follow. Wives are to be subservient to their husbands. Often, this subservience applies to sisters toward their brothers. A woman’s role in life is to be a homemaker (Mike Pence).
- The rules of their religion are complex and rigid and must be followed. Therefore, to avoid any confusion, children of fundamentalists must be sequestered in an environment of like-minded adherents to the corresponding fundamentalist religion. Especially so in their schooling (Besty DeVos).

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- There is no pluralism. Their rules apply to everyone everywhere (Jeff Sessions).
- There is a distinct group of insiders and all others are outsiders. Insiders are nurtured and cared for. Outsiders are cast off and fought (Steve Bannon).
- They pine for an older age and a past when their religion was pure, as largely they no longer see it as such. Often, this time never truly existed, but they have a nostalgic view of a Utopian past and they long to acquire it (Make America Great Again).

Fundamentalist religion, the program of Trump, and the regressive economics he promotes are barely distinguishable.

Two trends over the past 30 to 40 years puzzled many social scientists. Wilkinson and Pickett (2010, 36-37) discuss the contradiction posed by surveys that found rising levels of self-esteem across the US population simultaneous with other studies that found heightened experiences of anxiety and depression. Why/how could people with strong self-esteem be increasingly troubled by anxiety and depression? On the face of it these trends are contradictory. But distinguishing between kinds of self-esteem resolves this conundrum. Digging into the data unearthed what is now deemed “unhealthy self-esteem”, a pumping up of one’s self image as a mode of protection from the “social evaluative threats” generated by rising levels of social inequality. People with healthy self-esteem exhibit “happiness, confidence, (are) able to accept criticism, an ability to make friends, and so on”. In contrast, those with unhealthy self-esteem “showed tendencies to violence, to racism, were insensitive to others and were bad at personal relationships”. Unhealthy self-esteem – sometimes labeled narcissism, chuffing one’s self up as a defensive strategy to counter a sense of weakness – explains how rising self-esteem can coexist with rising levels of anxiety and depression.

Donald Trump’s narcissism triggers his admirer’s unhealthy self-esteem. It’s not simply his narcissism that drives his acting out (middle of the night tweets about SNL, Meryl Streep or Snoop Daddy). In addition, his narcissism generates an energy loop... his behavior cons many to into seeing themselves in him. This sets up a chain reaction of back and forth reflections from Trump to supporters to Trump. Narcissism and fundamentalist religions feed each other too. As Wilkerson and Pickett demonstrate, the dramatic increases in inequality fuel the many social dysfunctions that are associated with unhealthy high self-esteem. Skinheads, white nationalists and the multitudes of hate groups aligned with Trump are not only the product of long simmering resentments, these movements are also the result of the explosive income inequality that marks the US political economy.

Consider too the ways that dualistic thinking, anti-pluralism, and cognitive rigidity fuel both right wing populism and religious fundamentalism. Dualistic thinkers are naïve. The “proper” authorities know everything, “knowledge is received truth. It is facts, correct theories, and right answers” (Kloss, 1994). Except when facts and theories challenge deeply held certainties... for those occasions there are “alternative facts” and the “lying media”.

For college professors, dualistic thinkers are among the most difficult students. Not because they misbehave (quite often they are passive and obedient), but because they are so unwilling to consider multiple, alternative interpretations or modes of analysis. Virtually all scholars of student achievement recognize that intellectual growth requires letting go of the black/white, right/wrong, true/false view of knowledge. But hanging onto dualism is made easier by conformity to religious fundamentalism, since the Church (the one true, right

Church) constantly reinforces this mode of thinking. Change and growth are limited by dualism.

Trump's rightwing economic populism unites fundamentalism, narcissism and dualism to create a powerful pull to a dismal past. In the longed for bygone age fathers did know best and education comprised transmission of undisputed facts. Because the one right way of knowing was so obviously correct, violence toward unbelievers – outsiders by definition – was sanctioned by the spurious, imagined “purity”. We've known for a long time that economic precarity and soaring inequality generate atavism. “Necessitous men are not free men. People who are hungry and out of a job are the stuff of which dictatorships are made” (Roosevelt, 1944).

Tower trash

“Owning such beautiful buildings... The Empire State Building, 40 Wall Street, there are a couple of them that are just really incredible buildings. Forty Wall Street is probably the most beautiful tower in New York” (Trump, accessed March 18, 2017).

Neoliberalism worships avarice. Anything that impedes profit maximization is bad, everything that facilitates financial gain is good. Damn the human costs of austerity and deregulation. As Galbraith puts it, “Men, it is assumed, act in economic matters solely in response to pecuniary compensation or, as the only alternative, to force” (1967 [2007], 163). That's what makes grabbing pussy the purrfect analogy for Donald Trump's *Mad Max* economy of rape, pillage and plunder. Run an oil pipeline thru sacred Native lands? Do it. Sell National Parks to the highest bidder? Why not? Wreck public schools? Go for it. Zero out federal support for the arts? Happily. End food subsidies for the elderly and school aged kids? But of course. Actions that initiate flows of dollars to Trump's family and friends cause good things to happen.

It's not difficult to see that monetary incentives are not far removed from corporal punishment. “Compulsion and pecuniary compensation exist in varying degrees of association with each other” (Galbraith, 1967 [2007], 167). This atavistic view of work is motivated by fear of punishment via material deprivation. Intrinsic motivation is an oxymoron. Work, connive, collude... get wealth... buy fancy, glitzy, sparking stuff... flaunt success in the competitive struggle. Joel Grey knew what drove high ranking Nazis, “Money makes the world go round” (*Cabaret*, 1972). It's no different for Trump.

The cruelty that is the flip side of money worship was captured brilliantly by Jimmy Breslin when he wrote about the full page ad placed by Trump in every NYC paper following the sexual violence in Central Park.

“Mayor Koch has stated that hate and rancor should be removed from our hearts. I do not think so. I want to hate these muggers and murderers. They should be forced to suffer and, when they kill, they should be executed for their crimes... Yes, Mayor Koch, I want to hate these murderers and I always will. I am not looking to psychoanalyze them or understand them, I am looking to punish them... I no longer want to understand their anger. I want them to understand our anger. I want them to be afraid (Breslin, 1989).

Losers can't (and no one should let them) avoid their punishment. And punishment should always be as extreme as possible. For the millions swept up by the prison/industrial complex, punishment is literal. For the millions more working at or near the minimum wage, punishment is deprivation. For the tens of millions affected by Trump's budget, punishment is unflinching austerity. The flip side of money worship is deliberately imposed suffering. Sadism as national policy.

Forget art for art's sake or learning for learning's sake. Everything is reduced to a financial calculation. If it doesn't directly inflate the bottom line, cut it. With religious fundamentalism this bankrupt view of human motivation buttresses economic populism, "hailing" subjects, seducing the insecure to celebrate Bentham's "*felicific calculus of pain and pleasure*", even as that calculus imposes pain on its ardent supporters. National policy of sado-masochism.

Are we family?

"Happy families are all alike, every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way"
(Tolstoy, 1877 [2004], p. 1).

A president, even one as unpresidential as Donald Trump, is the nation's metaphorical father. Trump aligns perfectly with Lakoff's (1996) "strict father" model of polity as family. The trademark "You're Fired!" reeks of tough love. Daddy Trump teaches children – everyone less rich than him – self-reliance and self-discipline through punishment. In Lakoff's view, strict father families and nurturant parent families see society through opposing world views.

	Strict Father Families	Nurturant Parent Families
Morality	Evil is all around us, constantly tempting us. Thus, the basis of morality is strong moral character, which requires self-reliance and self-discipline. The primary vices are those that dissolve self-discipline, such as laziness, gluttony, and indulgent sexuality.	The basis of morality is in understanding, respecting, and helping other people, and in seeking the happiness of one's self and of others. The primary vices are selfishness and anti-social behavior.
Child Development	Children develop self-discipline, self-reliance, and other virtues primarily through rewards and punishment, a system of "tough love". Since parents know the difference between right and wrong and children still do not, obedience to the parents is very important. Moral development basically lasts only as long as childhood; it's important to get it right the first time, because there is no "second chance".	Children develop morality primarily through interacting with and observing good people, especially good parents. Punishment is necessary in some cases, but also has the potential to backfire, causing children to adopt more violent or more anti-social ways. Though children should, in general, obey their parents, they will develop best if allowed to question their parents' decisions, to hear justifications for their parents' rules, and so on. Moral development is a lifelong process, and almost no one is so perfect as not to need improvement.
Justice	The world may be a difficult place to live, but it is basically just; people usually get what they deserve. The difficulties in one's life serve as a test to sort the deserving from the undeserving.	The world is not without justice, but it is far from the ideal of justice. Many people, for example, do not seem properly rewarded for their hard work and dedication. We must work hard to improve everyone's condition.

One of Trump Jr's classmates at The University of Pennsylvania offered this vignette of his father.

"There were quite a few students standing around watching, trying to catch a glimpse of the famed real estate magnate," according to Melker. "Don Jr opened the door, wearing a Yankee jersey. Without saying a word, his father slapped him across the face, knocking him to the floor in front of all of his classmates. He simply said 'put on a suit and meet me outside,' and closed the door" (Melker 2017).

A unique unhappiness if ever there was one.

Picture instead a different mode of family interaction. Nurturant parent families "revolve around every family member caring for and being cared for by every other family member, with open communication between all parties, and with each family member pursuing their own vision of happiness" (Lakoff, 1996). Families living with economic security are much more likely to develop nurturant styles of being.

Trumponomics is focused on undoing economic security and amplifying pressures to restore strict father families. Wiping out the EPA, public schools, Obamacare, Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, libraries and all manner of other civil institutions, undercuts the stability and security of all but the richest families. Families regress. However unhappy they may have been, they will surely become less happy, each in their unique way.

The atavistic pull at the center of Trump's attraction is revealed by a gendered reading of the images and metaphors which animate it. The following passages, from Lakoff's *Moral Politics* (1996, pp. 5-6) illustrate the intimate connection between visions of family and economic policy. Lakoff riffs on conservative columnist William Raspberry's take on Washington DC's budget crisis:

"The government of the District of Columbia is reeling from a newly discovered budget shortfall of at least \$722 million and there is growing talk of a congressional takeover of the city."

After an example of spending he considers questionable, Raspberry says,

"What is about to do us in... is the poor but compassionate mother with a credit card. To put it another way, a huge amount of the city's stupendous debt is the result of the local government's effort to do good things it can't afford."

He then gives a list of examples of good things the city government wants to do and which he thinks it can't afford, and (Raspberry) finishes the column as follows:

"But a good chunk of the underlying problem is the compassionate mom's attitude that says: 'If it's good for the kid to have, then I ought to buy it—and worry later about where the money will come from.' Well, Mom not only has reached her credit limit: she's in so much trouble that scrimping and saving won't solve the problem. She'll need a bailout from Congress. But then, she has to learn to say no—not just to junk food but to quality cuts of meat she can't afford."

A radically different reading is possible.

“One could have observed that Washington, D.C., must have city services beyond its population to serve the large number of relatively well-off civil service workers, lobbyists, and others who live in the wealthy suburbs but work in town. One could also have mentioned that it is the *responsibility* of Congress to see that the city is maintained properly and that it lives by a humane standard, indeed that it should set a standard for the country. One could then apply the metaphor of the government as parent to Congress, seeing Congress as a deadbeat dad, refusing to pay for the support of his children, the citizens of Washington, D.C. One could then have drawn the moral that deadbeat dad Congress must meet his responsibilities and pay, no matter how tough it is for him.”

Conclusion

Economies and families are inextricably tied in our everyday lives and in our deepest unconscious. Primitive impulses toward exclusion, shame, and painful discipline are unleashed as families crack under the economic pressure of stagnant wages, declining benefits, deteriorating public services, and rising inequality. Pander to the rich. Destroy the social fabric. Adults, suffering the pain of harsh austerities long for the comfort of their imagined, culturally scripted old fashioned families. Such a misdirected wish. Strict-father families and the ethos of punishment are not the stuff of fulfilling household economies. Nurturant household economies require policies that solicit care from all according to their abilities and deliver care to all according to their needs.

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