

[This is a preprint of a chapter accepted for publication by Johns Hopkins University Press for publication in Anxiety Culture: The New Global State of Human Affairs, edited by John P. Allegrante, Ulrich Hoinkes, Michael Schapira, and Karen Struve, forthcoming 2024]

Discourse, Fantasy and Anxiety in Trump's America¹

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This chapter examines the role of anxiety in the rise and persistence of Trumpism, a unique ideological blend of white supremacy, misogyny and patriarchy as well as populism that informed much of former President Donald J. Trump's election campaign and term in office. Trumpism represents a particularly interesting case for anyone interested in the nexus between discourse, fantasy and in particular anxiety, commonly understood as "a sense of uncertainty or unease over something that cannot quite be identified" (p. 215).² However, in politics, constructing anxiety also serves the crucial function of maintaining quiescence and de-legitimizing dissent.³ This argument seems to be at least partly responsible for the 1) almost complete immunity of Trumpism's followers to opposing evidence and 2) their stubborn

¹ An earlier version of this was presented as a paper at the conference "Varieties of Anxiety--A Global Perspective," December 10-11, 2019, New York University. The authors would like to thank the participants as well as members of the "Anxiety Culture" project for helpful comments.

² Brent J. Steele and Alexandra Homolar, "Ontological insecurities and the politics of contemporary populism," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32, no. 3 (2019): 214-221, doi: 10.1080/09557571.2019.1596612.

³ Dirk Nabers, *A Poststructuralist Discourse Theory of Global Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

refusal to hold Trump and other advocates of Trumpism to any moral or legal standards.⁴ Thus, many Trumpists not only refused to accept a vaccine that is widely considered very effective against Covid-19,⁵ some of them preferring a horse dewormer that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration has explicitly warned against,⁶ but also believed, bar any evidence, that the 2020 U.S. presidential election was fraudulent.⁷ Neither did Trump's pursuit of liberal economic policies appear to have had any meaningful effect on his support among poor white voters whose class interests these policies directly contradict. Similarly, the breaking of moral and even legal norms by Trump and members of his administration seem not to have had any meaningful implications for either his base or his supporters in Congress. Even his followers' attempt, incited by Trump's claims that his election victory had been "stolen by emboldened radical-left Democrats" and the "fake news media,"⁸ to violently stop the certification of Joe

⁴ Although Trumpism predates Trump's presidential bid, Trump himself personifies this discursive amalgam like few others, although later on, FOX "News" host Tucker Carlson as well as representatives Matt Gaetz, Marjory Taylor Green and a few others appear to have out-Trumped Trump.

⁵ Ariel Fridman, Rachel Gershon, and Ayelet Gneezy, "COVID-19 and Vaccine Hesitancy: A Longitudinal Study," *PLoS One* 16, no. 4 (2021.): e0250123, doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0250123. This has gone so far that Trump himself has faced backlash due to his muted advocacy for the vaccine.

⁶ See <https://www.fda.gov/consumers/consumer-updates/why-you-should-not-use-ivermectin-treat-or-prevent-covid-19>.

⁷ Andrew C. Eggers, Haritz Garro, and Justin Grimmer "No Evidence for Systematic Voter Fraud: A Guide to Statistical Claims About the 2020 Election," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 118, no. 45 (2021):e2103619118, doi: 10.1073/pnas.2103619118.

⁸ See <https://www.npr.org/2021/02/10/966396848/read-trumps-jan-6-speech-a-key-part-of-impeachment-trial?t=1644327730710>.

Biden's election victory in Congress on January 6, 2021 (1/6), a de facto armed insurrection, did not lead to his removal from office.⁹ Also, his election loss appears to have done zero damage to Trumpism's appeal. Indeed, if anything, the Republican Party (GOP) continued its movement towards embracing Trumpism even more than before. In sum, truth and morality appear to be suspended when it comes to Trump--a fact that has led commentators to refer to him as "Teflon Don."¹⁰

The chapter thus sets out to contribute to our understanding of this phenomenon. Theoretically, it draws on poststructuralist discourse theory (PDT) and Lacanian psychoanalysis¹¹ (in particular its reformulation by Slavoj Žižek¹²) to make sense of the appeal of certain discourses and in particular the role that anxiety plays in this context. In a nutshell, we argue that the appeal of Trumpism can be explained by the discourse's fantasmatic dimension or category of enjoyment--*jouissance* in Lacanian terms¹³--which promises essential identities and social stability in times of crisis. That is, what made, and continues to make, Trumpism so appealing is its (ultimately empty) promise of a fully constituted, "essential" American identity. Ultimately, what makes "make America great again" (MAGA) successful

⁹ Paul Musgrave, "This Is a Coup. Why Were Experts So Reluctant to See It Coming?" *Foreign Policy*, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/01/06/this-is-a-coup-live/>. See also David C. Rapoport, "The Capitol Attack and the 5th Terrorism Wave," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 33, no. 5 (2021): 912-916. doi: 10.1080/09546553.2021.1932338.

¹⁰ See <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/09/13/teflon-trump-democrats-messaging-242607>.

¹¹ Jacques Lacan, *Anxiety: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011).

¹² Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

¹³ Jason Glynos and David Howarth, *Logics of Critical Explanation in Social and Political Theory* (London: Routledge, 2007).

is its unapologetic quest to restore “real”--that is, white, male, Christian, heterosexual, cis-gendered--Americans to the privileged position in society that they not only think they deserve but whose absence they perceive as oppression. This appeal, we argue, is further multiplied by anxiety among Trumpists produced by political practices that openly challenge white supremacy, patriarchy and neoliberal capitalism as naturalized political practices shaping U.S. society. Understood this way, Trumpism’s appeal is not in spite of its obvious racist and misogynist references and its open contempt for moral and legal norms but (in part at least) because of it.

A focus on fantasy and affect can add new dimensions to research on so-called “populism,” which has briefly pointed to anxiety as a factor¹⁴ but has--aside from a few notable exceptions¹⁵--not systematically explored this important concept. We thus build on existing studies and complement them in two respects: 1) By drawing on the notions of fantasy and jouissance, we foreground the role of anxiety as well as white supremacy and patriarchy as structural conditions of possibility; and 2) we empirically include the period beyond Trump’s time in office. While the next section introduces central concepts from PDT and Lacanian

¹⁴ Pippa Norris and Ronald F. Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

¹⁵ See Florentina C. Andreescu, “Donald Trump’s Appeal: A Socio-Psychoanalytic Analysis.” *Journal for Cultural Research* 23, no. 4 (2019): 348-364, doi: 10.1080/14797585.2019.1703342; Moran Mandelbaum, “‘Making Our Country Great Again’: The Politics of Subjectivity in an Age of National-Populism,” *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law - Revue internationale de Sémiotique juridique* 33, no. 2 (2020): 451-476, doi: 10.1007/s11196-020-09717-6; and Chris McMillan, “MakeAmericaGreatAgain: Ideological Fantasy, American Exceptionalism and Donald Trump.” *Subjectivity* 10, no. 2 (2017): 204-222, doi: 10.1057/s41286-017-0024-z.

theory, the subsequent section provides a tentative illustration of the theoretical arguments made here, drawing mainly on statements made by Trump, members of his administration and accompanying media coverage. As we will illustrate on the example of Trumpism, the very concept of the political is based on the identification of the enemy and the creation of anxiety, which is best understood through an exploration of the fantasmatic logics at play in this discourse. The conclusion sums up the main findings and outlines avenues for further research.

Anxiety, Fantasy, and Discourse

How can we make sense of phenomena like Trumpism and the “grip” it has on subjects, even in the face of overwhelming contrary evidence, as the Big Lie shows?¹⁶ Before we jump into the theoretical argument itself, we first need to at least briefly locate Trumpism in ontological terms. That is, what kind of a thing is Trumpism? Understood in discourse theoretical terms, Trumpism is a specific discourse. Discourses from a poststructuralist perspective are understood as “relational systems of signification,” (p. 14)¹⁷ that is, networks of related discursive elements (words, non-verbal practices and so on) that acquire their specific contextual meaning as a result of how they are arranged vis-à-vis each other. Put simply, what the term “apple” refers to in the context of a supermarket is different from what it means in

¹⁶ Jason Glynos, “The Grip of Ideology: A Lacanian Approach to the Theory of Ideology,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 6, no. 2 (2001): 191-214, doi: 10.1080/13569310120053858.

¹⁷ Jacob Torfing, “Discourse Theory: Achievements, Arguments, and Challenges,” In *Discourse Theory in European Politics*, David Howarth and Jacob Torfing, eds. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 1-32.

an IT discourse because the discursive elements it is linked to differ between the two contexts--say, bananas, raspberries and pineapples in one, IBM, Microsoft and Google in the other.¹⁸ The connection of previously unconnected elements transforms these elements into moments of a specific discourse. We call this transformation *articulation*. Articulation signifies, both in a linguistic and in a very practical sense, for subjects acquire meaning only through their positioning in a structure--be it linguistic or social. In this perspective, discourse becomes coterminous with the social; in fact, it can be highly material when it becomes institutionalized.¹⁹ Discourses are relevant for political and sociological analysis because meaning--the way we come to understand the world around us--is not naturally given but instead the result of discursive struggles between different competing articulatory practices. Two aspects are worth accentuating here. First, although meaning is not unproblematic, people do take it for granted most of the time,²⁰ and as a result, what comes to be accepted as the truth has a potentially significant impact on how we engage with the world. For how we understand reality--which phenomena we see as policy problems to be solved, whom we

¹⁸ Frank A. Stengel, *The Politics of Military Force: Antimilitarism, Ideational Change and Post-Cold War German Security Discourse* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2020), 20. Discourse then loosely corresponds to what from a more conventional perspective would be referred to as an ideology, i.e., "configurations of political concepts" (See Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 48. The difference is that discourse encompasses any meaningful subjects, objects and practices, not just political concepts (see Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. 2nd ed. [London: Verso, 2001], 107).

¹⁹ Dirk Nabers, "Crisis and Dislocation in Global Politics," *Politics* 37, no. 4 (2017): 418-431.

²⁰ This is for practical reasons as much as anything else, for if we were to question each and every aspect of what we think we know about reality we would very likely not even make it out of the house each morning.

consider a friend or an enemy, whether human beings are matter or walking wave functions-
-unavoidably influences how we behave towards others. For instance, if I think the
Coronavirus pandemic is a hoax cooked up by Bill Gates to implant microchips in people's
bodies,²¹ it is very likely I will not get the vaccine and as a result, risk my and other people's
health as well as contribute to the pandemic turning into a really shitty version of *The
NeverEnding Story*.²² Second, contrary to common sense, reality itself does not function as a
neutral arbiter here, rejecting "false" discourses and making truthful ones more effective
(otherwise, no one would believe Trump's Big Lie). Instead, which representation manages to
assert itself as the only valid truth depends on factors other than an allegedly objective reality,
which brings us to the role of fantasy.

Lacanian theory, which has been widely employed to amend poststructuralist
discourse theory,²³ delivers a model that explains, at least in part, how some discourses
manage to assert itself in struggles between different competing depictions of reality. Fantasy,
and its connection with anxiety, is crucial in this respect. From a Lacanian perspective, anxiety
is a chronic condition of human life, constitutive of the futile drive towards identity.²⁴

If we want to understand this, we need to turn our attention to the Lacanian conception
of the subject. For Lacan, the subject is constituted by the symbolic. The symbolic order refers
to what from a discourse theoretical perspective would be called discourse or the social; it is

²¹ See <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/bill-gates-and-other-globalists-use-the-corona-pandemic-to-implant-microchips-in-the-whole-of-humanity/>.

²² *The NeverEnding Story*, Directed by Wolfgang Petersen, Warner Bros., 1984.

²³ For example, see Yannis Stavrakakis, *Lacan & the Political* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).

²⁴ Lacan, *Anxiety: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X*.

the entirety of social structures, roles, subject positions, practices, institutions, etc. “into which individual human beings are thrown at birth.”²⁵ The symbolic order however fails to capture reality in its entirety. It is marked by a “constitutive incompleteness” (p. 99)²⁶ or what Laclau refers to as “dislocation” (p. 39).²⁷ As Nabers²⁸ shows, dislocation has two crucial dimensions: First, it implies translocation, referring to a situation in which a signifier that is seen as foreign to a particular discourse enters and destabilizes the internal structure of that discourse, an example being the allegedly “Chinese virus” that has entered the Western world. Subjects, practices and institutions are continuously called into question by such translocatory discourses. Second, dislocation denotes inarticulation and is often related to trauma, i.e., a situation that is hard to describe and yet desperately demands to be communicated. As an omnipresent feature of the social, dislocation thus creates unstable subjects, as well as ambiguous and incomplete symbolic structures. The “stuff” that is left out of the symbolic by translocation and trauma, which exceeds the limits of discourse and cannot be represented, is what Lacan calls the real. Most notably with respect to the subject, the real includes the subject’s affective side, or enjoyment.²⁹ Affect here refers to the “unconscious bodily intensity”

²⁵ Adrian Johnston, “Jacques Lacan,” In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward N. Zalta, ed., 2018.

²⁶ Jason Glynos, “Critical Fantasy Studies,” *Journal of Language and Politics* 20, no. 1 (2021): 95-111, doi: <https://doi.org/10.1075/jlp.20052.gly>.

²⁷ Ernesto Laclau, ed., *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (London: Verso, 1990).

²⁸ Dirk Nabers, *A Poststructuralist Discourse Theory of Global Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); and Dirk Nabers, “Discursive Dislocation: Toward a Poststructuralist Theory of Crisis in Global Politics,” *New Political Science* 41, no. 2 (2019): 263-278.

²⁹ Jakub Eberle, *Discourse and Affect in Foreign Policy: Germany and the Iraq War* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 14.

that, once articulated in discourse, becomes a specific emotion, such as anger or joy.³⁰ Comparable to dislocation, the real disrupts the symbolic, constantly transcending its limits.

As a result of the constitutive role of dislocation and the disruptive character of the real, the subject is necessarily “split”³¹ or “traumatized.”³² This is where anxiety comes into play, as the gap between the subject’s strive for completeness and the affective subject’s dislocated character constitutes it as fragile, insecure and open to apprehension (p. 404).^{33, 34} In other words, anxiety stems from the subject being confronted with an inaccessible desire, or, more precisely, it is “the very experience of this inaccessibility” (p. 29).³⁵ Lacanian psychoanalysis presumes that precisely because the subject cannot ever attain a full identity (because the lack is constitutive), it has a never-ending desire for a stable identity. The question turns from “Who am I?” into “Who do I want to be?” However, desire in Lacanian terminology should not be confused with demand or need, e.g., hunger. Desire is, in Glynos’s words, “what emerges in the dissatisfaction felt when the demand is actually met,”³⁶ for instance in Post-Tenure Depression Syndrome. Indeed, a core feature of desire is that it cannot ever be

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Laclau, *Anxiety: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X*.

³² Torfing, “Discourse Theory: Achievements, Arguments, and Challenges,” 17.

³³ Nadya Ali and Ben Whitham, “The Unbearable Anxiety of Being: Ideological Fantasies of British Muslims Beyond the Politics of Security,” *Security Dialogue* 49, no. 5 (2018): 400-417, doi: 10.1177/0967010618794050.

³⁴ Nabers, “Crisis and Dislocation in Global Politics.”

³⁵ J. Peter Burgess, “For Want of Not: Lacan’s Conception of Anxiety,” In *Politics of Anxiety*, Emmy Eklundh, Andreja Zevnik and Emmanuel-Pierre Guittet, eds. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 17-35.

³⁶ Glynos, “Critical Fantasy Studies,” 200.

fulfilled.³⁷ Desire works because it remains “forever *dis-satisfied*.”³⁸ In Johnston’s words, “[n]o object” the subject “gets its hands on is ever quite ‘IT’.”³⁹ As a result, the subject is in constant pursuit of the unreachable (because nonexistent) object of its desire.

In that sense, desire and enjoyment are closely related to the concept of fantasy. Broadly speaking, fantasy refers to specific discourses that blame the lack of “our” identity on another (immigrants, terrorists, billionaires, capitalism, the deep state, etc.) and propose a certain course of action that will not only overcome the Other but in doing so will restore the lost fullness of the subject’s identity. As Moran Mandelbaum argues in his work on Brexit, fantasy does at least two things: 1) It “produces a sense of loss” in that it gives an ontic form to a lack that is actually ontological (for example, by blaming detached or corrupt elites for the loss of an allegedly better past) and 2) promises a way forwards to regain that lost fullness (for instance by claiming that a return to that mythical past can be realized by taking certain actions).⁴⁰ Fantasy is ideological in Laclau’s sense in that it covers “over the radical contingency of social relations.”⁴¹ It pretends that that if only action XYZ were taken, the (constitutive) lack could be overcome and a fully constituted identity could be realized, giving the subject an object to desire. We can distinguish here between a “beatific” and a “horrific side of fantasy,”

³⁷ Burgess, “For Want of Not: Lacan’s Conception of Anxiety.”

³⁸ Glynos, “The Grip of Ideology: A Lacanian Approach to the Theory of Ideology,” 201.

³⁹ Johnston, “Jacques Lacan.”

⁴⁰ Mandelbaum, “‘Making Our Country Great Again’: The Politics of Subjectivity in an Age of National-Populism,” 457.

⁴¹ Jason Glynos and David Howarth, *Logics of Critical Explanation in Social and Political Theory* (London: Routledge, 2007), 15.

where the former refers to the promise of wholeness and the latter to potentially catastrophic consequences if a certain course of action is not taken (p. 283).⁴² As Eberle points out, “[t]he structure of a fantasmatic narrative [...] pictures our very identity as threatened and offers a particular policy as the way of making identity whole again, or at least averting some irreparable damage to it.”⁴³ In doing so, a fantasmatic discourse structures and directs the subject’s enjoyment and sustains its desire.⁴⁴

Importantly, because fantasy gives a form to desire, it is not supposed to be realized either. In Žižek’s words, “fantasy, at its most elementary, is inaccessible to the subject, and it is this inaccessibility which makes the subject ‘empty.’”⁴⁵ In fact, as Glynos explains, if the subject were to get too close to the realization of its fantasy, this would not have a satisfying effect on the subject but, quite to the contrary, the subject would “experience an unbearable anxiety as a result of suddenly being confronted not with lack (since it is upon this very lack that desire is founded), but with the *lack of a lack*”.⁴⁶ In Lacan’s words, “that what is feared is success.”⁴⁷ Anxiety is linked to the need to stabilize the subject as a subject of desire.⁴⁸

⁴² Jason Glynos, “Ideological Fantasy at Work.” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 13, no. 3 (2008): 275-296, doi: 10.1080/13569310802376961.

⁴³ Eberle, *Discourse and Affect in Foreign Policy: Germany and the Iraq War*, 106.

⁴⁴ See Glynos, “The Grip of Ideology,” 200; and Glynos and Howarth, *Logics of Critical Explanation in Social and Political Theory*, 107.

⁴⁵ Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative*, 159.

⁴⁶ Glynos, “The Grip of Ideology,” 201.

⁴⁷ Lacan, *Anxiety: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X*, 54.

⁴⁸ Burgess, “For Want of Not: Lacan’s Conception of Anxiety.”

Fantasy has another function with respect to anxiety, namely to manage it. For instance, Ali and Whitham claim that fantasies about Muslims allow British society to “avoid confrontation with contradictory and upsetting aspects of our social ‘Real.’”⁴⁹ Similarly, drawing on an ontological-security framework, Steele and Homolar have argued that in times of anxiety, people tend to stick to routines, which can manifest itself as resistance to expertise. In such a case, ignorance can function as a “coping mechanism,”⁵⁰ lending support to populist anti-intellectual projects. On the flipside, one could argue that the dislocation of and political practices that challenge fantasmatic discourses should contribute to anxiety among the subjects that have identified with a specific fantasmatic discourse.

The important point here is that fantasy highlights the moment of the subject; it links affect and discourse together. Subjects affectively invest in certain fantasies, and it is this investment that explains different discourses longevity. In Eberle’s words, “it is the affective investment that holds discursive orders together.”⁵¹ Understood this way, it is not their rationality or purportedly objective truthfulness that makes certain representations credible for certain audiences, but primarily their ability to channel enjoyment by providing the illusion of a fully constituted identity. In that sense, fantasy adds an important aspect by pointing to the affective side of persuasion.⁵²

⁴⁹ Ali and Whitham, “The Unbearable Anxiety of Being: Ideological Fantasies of British Muslims Beyond the Politics of Security,” 401.

⁵⁰ Brent J. Steele and Alexandra Homolar, “Ontological Insecurities and the Politics of Contemporary Populism,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32, no. 3 (2019): 214-221, doi: 10.1080/09557571.2019.1596612.

⁵¹ Eberle, *Discourse and Affect in Foreign Policy: Germany and the Iraq War*, 15.

⁵² Glynos, “Critical Fantasy Studies,” 100.

Trumpism as a Fantasmatic Discourse

Lacanian theory's strong suit is to add to our understanding of cases in which people stick to certain ideologies even in the face of overwhelming contrary evidence. What makes Trumpism particularly interesting as a case is that it defies expectations on many fronts. Trump's norm-breaking behavior already during his presidential campaign alone led many observers to expect that he would likely be forced out of the race even before the GOP nomination. Thus, his racist, misogynistic and anti-democratic remarks (about Mexican "rapists" and grabbing women "by the pussy" as well as his refusal to accept an election loss) were expected to end his campaign.⁵³ Nevertheless, and against all odds, he not only won the nomination but also the presidency. Equally, his base stuck with him despite the fact that many claims he made during his term in office were in blatant conflict with scientific evidence, such as his claim that climate change was a hoax or that COVID-19 would simply vanish or could be treated by injecting disinfectant.⁵⁴ The most infamous example is the "Big Lie," Trump's claim that the 2020 election had been "stolen by emboldened radical-left Democrats" and the "fake news media."⁵⁵ In spite of a complete lack of evidence--as pointed out by Trump's own Attorney

⁵³ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/oct/08/donald-trump-forced-into-apology-as-sex-boast-tape-horrifies-republicans>

⁵⁴ Carol Leonnig and Philip Rucker, *I Alone Can Fix It: Donald J. Trump's Catastrophic Final Year* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021).

⁵⁵ <https://www.npr.org/2021/02/10/966396848/read-trumps-jan-6-speech-a-key-part-of-impeachment-trial?t=1644327730710>

General William Barr--on January 6, 2021, Trump's supporters stormed the U.S. Capitol to stop the certification of Joe Biden's election victory (1/6).⁵⁶ Like Brexit⁵⁷--and indeed many other examples of so-called "populism"--Trumpism's lasting influence even after Trump left office is a phenomenon that is hard to explain with recourse purely to allegedly "rational" motives. This is why a turn to fantasy and enjoyment can be very fruitful.

So how can we make sense of this remarkably powerful grip that Trumpism seems to exert over people? From a Lacanian perspective, Trumpism's grip is best explained by focusing on its fantasmatic character. And indeed, in many respects, Trumpism appears like an ideal typical example for a fantasmatic discourse. To begin with, Trumpism offers a simple and clear explanation for the lack that the subject experiences as anxiety. According to Trumpism, America has lost its greatness and is currently facing a severe crisis. As Trump claimed in his presidential announcement speech, "Our country is in serious trouble. We don't have victories anymore. We used to have victories, but we don't have them. [...] We got nothing but problems. [...] Sadly, the American dream is dead. But if I get elected president I will bring it back bigger and better and stronger than ever before, and we will make America great again."⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Musgrave, "This Is a Coup. Why Were Experts So Reluctant to See It Coming?" See also Rapoport, "The Capitol Attack and the 5th Terrorism Wave."

⁵⁷ Christopher S. Browning, "Brexit Populism and Fantasies of Fulfilment," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32, no. 3 (2019): 222-244, doi: 10.1080/09557571.2019.1567461; and Mandelbaum, "'Making Our Country Great Again': The Politics of Subjectivity in an Age of National-Populism."

⁵⁸ See <https://time.com/3923128/donald-trump-announcement-speech/>.

Crisis and lack are co-constitutive in this picture, which can be well explained through the theoretical vocabulary presented above. Two dimensions are particularly pertinent in this context: First, what Lacan, Laclau and others have called an “ontology of lack” directly relates to the absent ground of society, giving identity “the name of what we *desire* but can never *fully* attain.”⁵⁹ Crisis, as dislocation, becomes a permanent underlying feature of the social to be exploited by political forces. Second, the articulation of crisis is necessarily based on an identification of the enemy. Thus, the reason for America’s lost greatness was, according to Trump, the fact that the United States was ruled by incompetent and/or corrupt elites: “We have losers. We have losers. We have people that don’t have it. We have people that are morally corrupt. We have people that are selling this country down the drain.”⁶⁰ This is the point where the fantasmatic is linked with the populist dimension of Trumpist discourse, evident in the claim that ruling elites have become detached from the will of the people and that fixing things will require a restoration of popular sovereignty. As Laclau has maintained, popular identities are articulated on the basis of antagonistic frontiers.⁶¹ In a similar vein, Žižek has aptly shown that, “a nation *exists* only as long as its specific enjoyment continues to be materialized in a set of social practices and transmitted through national myths that structure

⁵⁹ Yannis Stavrakakis, “Passions of Identification: Discourse, Enjoyment, and European Identity,” In *Discourse Theory in European Politics: Identity, Policy and Governance*, David Howarth and Jacob Torfing, eds. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 68-92.

⁶⁰ See <https://time.com/3923128/donald-trump-announcement-speech/>

⁶¹ Ernesto Laclau. *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005).

these practices.”⁶² National unity, i.e., identity, can only be achieved through two interlinked moves: First, the (alleged) complete elimination of all dislocatory tendencies, in which the literal contents of particular social demands recede into the background and a mythical identity is translated into an imaginary horizon which provides the surface for the inscription of various political demands. Second, the articulation of antagonism. As Laclau summarizes: “[T]he only possibility of having a true outside would be that the outside is not simply one more, neutral element but an *excluded* one, something that the totality expels from itself in order to constitute itself.”⁶³

Especially during Trump’s reelection campaign and after President Joe Biden had assumed office, Trumpist discourse took on a conspicuously sinister tone. Had Trump mainly derided liberal elites as “stupid” during his first campaign,⁶⁴ now there was a dark conspiracy at work. This is the horrific aspect of Trumpism as a fantasmatic discourse, which fell on the fertile ground of a deeply dislocated society. Thus, the GOP claimed that Biden was pursuing “far-left socialist policies.”⁶⁵ Trump himself maintained that “Biden is a puppet of Bernie Sanders, AOC [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez], the militant left, the people that wanna rip down statues and monuments to George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, Jesus, okay, Jesus. They wanna rip down statues to Jesus.”⁶⁶ Here, Biden, Sanders, Alexandria

⁶² Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991), 202.

⁶³ Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 70.

⁶⁴ See <https://time.com/3923128/donald-trump-announcement-speech/>.

⁶⁵ See <https://www.gop.gov/bidens-far-left-socialist-policies-have-created-crisis-after-crisis/>.

⁶⁶ See <https://abcnews.go.com/US/video/trump-calls-joe-biden-puppet-left-71723819>.

Ocasio-Cortez and the “militant left” are articulated as an antagonistic Other threatening not just capitalism but also the Founding Fathers of the American republic and even Christianity itself. Similarly, the right-wing media painted a dark picture of the United States being overrun by, as FOX News host Tomi Lahren put it in October 2021, “illegal immigrants looking to bust in and invade our country,” while Biden was functioning as a “puppet” for the left to “ramrod through their radical socialist agenda.”⁶⁷ Indeed, according to FOX News host Tucker Carlson, the Democrats were planning nothing less than to open U.S. borders to illegal immigrants with the aim to replace “legacy Americans with more obedient people from far away countries,” i.e., replacing white Americans with people of color.⁶⁸ An ideological, fantasmatic discourse creating widespread anxiety becomes eye-catching in this context, which Žižek summarizes as follows:

What is at stake in ethnic tensions is always the possession of the national Thing: the “other” wants to steal our enjoyment (by ruining our “way of life”) and/or it has access to some secret, perverse enjoyment. In short, what gets on our nerves, what really bothers us about the “other”, is the peculiar way he organizes his enjoyment (the smell of his food, his “noisy” songs and dances, his strange manners, his attitude to work-- in the racist perspective, the “other” is either a workaholic stealing our jobs or an idler

⁶⁷ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1xjHCD4hybs>.

⁶⁸ See https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=Z_0iFBJPW0Y.

living on our labor). The basic paradox is that our Thing is conceived as something inaccessible to the other and at the same time threatened by him.⁶⁹

Identity-building and the creation of anxiety go hand in hand in the process of constructing the American people in Trumpist discourse. It is here that we can also see that Trumpism, in particular in its radicalized form, articulates a very specific version of the American society, namely one that is primarily white. For in Trumpist discourse the category of the people does not refer to the entirety of the American populace. Rather, Trumpist discourse clearly distinguishes between “real” Americans and others. Real Americans according to this discourse are what Carlson calls “legacy Americans,” a code for white people.⁷⁰ The national crisis that Trumpist discourse produced seemed ideal for the fruition of a binary discourse relying on a black-and-white picture of the world, based on relations of equivalence, difference, and the articulation of antagonistic frontiers. The notion of “real” Americans--aberrant as it may still be for the many critical minds inside and outside of American society--has thereby been thoroughly normalized in Trumpist circles.

What is more, this kind of division continues along party lines. For the goal to gain and hold on to power, Trumpists claim, the Democratic party will stop at nothing. Thus, Trump and his supporters continue to assert that the 2020 election was stolen from them. Already during the election night on November 3, 2020, Trump claimed that “we did win this election”

⁶⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1991), 165.

⁷⁰ See <https://thehill.com/opinion/civil-rights/580980-legacy-american-is-the-latest-catchphrase-in-the-racist-lexicon>.

and demanded that the counting of absentee ballots be stopped while he was in the lead: “We want all voting to stop.”⁷¹ During the following weeks and months, Trump maintained that he and his supporters were fighting for “honesty of our elections and the integrity of our glorious republic”⁷² and continued to push the Big Lie. Thus, on January 6, 2021, the day of the certification of Biden’s victory, Trump claimed that “our election victory [is being] stolen by emboldened radical-left Democrats, which is what they're doing. And stolen by the fake news media. That's what they've done and what they're doing. We will never give up, we will never concede. It doesn't happen. You don't concede when there's theft involved.”⁷³

What was at stake was not only the election but the future of the country as such. Thus, Trump demanded that his supporters “[fight] like hell. And if you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore.”⁷⁴ Again, we can identify three of the most important tenets of the logic of fantasy at play in this discourse: First, identity-building requires some kind of enjoyment, while enjoyment cannot be equated with pleasure but often implies the construction of anxiety. The affective power of Trumpism does not stem from it being able to offer pleasure but “closure.”⁷⁵ Second, anxiety is based on the articulation of antagonistic frontiers. Accordingly, Trumpist discourse delivers an unambiguous explanation for who is standing in the way of a return to American greatness and thusly the continued presence of a

⁷¹ See <https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/donald-trump-2020-election-night-speech-transcript>.

⁷² See <https://www.npr.org/2021/02/10/966396848/read-trumps-jan-6-speech-a-key-part-of-impeachment-trial>.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Mandelbaum, “‘Making Our Country Great Again’: The Politics of Subjectivity in an Age of National-Populism,” 457.

lack and, by extension, the subject's continued trauma. Hence, Trumpist discourse can be characterized "as structured around a certain traumatic impossibility, around a certain fissure which *cannot* be symbolized."⁷⁶ Third, dislocation is constitutive of the social, making identity necessarily futile, while at the same time triggering a sense of collective identity, on which politics can be conducted. In this sense, inaction would, according to the Trumpists, lead to the complete loss of the country.

Implicit in this articulation is the promise that MAGA success and the overcoming of the leftist obstacle will restore America to greatness and realize a fully constituted identity for the subject. As Trump put it in his announcement speech, "We need somebody that can take the brand of the United States and make it great again. It's not great again. We need--we need somebody--we need somebody that literally will take this country and make it great again."⁷⁷ On January 6th, Trump claimed that "Our exciting adventures and boldest endeavors have not yet begun."⁷⁸ MAGA is turned into a mythical imperative at this stage. Myths essentially depict an absence, but that absence is necessary for social transformation to become an on-going possibility. It can only be constructed around emptiness, as any precise details or a concrete scheme for the future development path would move the myth into the realm of everyday politics, and it would lose its quality as a myth. Myths are no more than a foil which represents the missing fullness of a nation. The desire for fullness, in turn, is constitutive for the nation's development path towards future greatness. With respect to the United States, Deborah

⁷⁶ Slavoj Žižek, "Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes Please!," In Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, eds. *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (London: Verso, 1990), 249.

⁷⁷ See <https://time.com/3923128/donald-trump-announcement-speech/>.

⁷⁸ See <https://www.npr.org/2021/02/10/966396848/read-trumps-jan-6-speech-a-key-part-of-impeachment-trial>.

Madsen therefore claims that: American exceptionalism permeates every period of American history and is the single most powerful agent in a series of arguments that have been fought down the centuries concerning the identity of America and Americans.⁷⁹

Here, myths establish a relation to the pure but lost origin, in Trumpist discourse articulated through the MAGA slogan. This is the beatific side of fantasy, in which MAGA functions as a master signifier, an empty signifier that its adherents can affectively identify with. What exactly it means to make America great again remains obscure. Trump does not explain what exactly the slogan would entail. But rather than a disadvantage, the emptiness of MAGA as a demand is a big part of its appeal because it allows a broad range of subjects to project their specific demands onto it. That is, the reason why a broad range of subjects can affectively identify with MAGA is precisely because it is whatever they want it to be.

Following the January 6th speech, Trump supporters stormed the Capitol. Not only did this armed insurrection not lead to his removal from office, but even after Trump left office the GOP did not return to a more moderate course but instead continued to further radicalize. Subsequently, the GOP embraced the Big Lie and began to reinterpret 1/6 as either a false flag operation by the leftist Antifa or instigated by the FBI, or as a patriotic service to democracy, hailing Ashli Babbitt, the woman who was shot and killed by a police officer during the riot, as a hero and martyr. Later on, the GOP even officially censured Republican Representatives Liz Cheney and Adam Kinzinger for their participation in the House Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the United States Capitol.⁸⁰ To be sure, aside from a few

⁷⁹ Deborah Madsen, *American Exceptionalism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998).

⁸⁰<https://time.com/6145764/rnc-censures-liz-cheney-adam-kinzinger-january-6-donald-trump/>

true believers, GOP leaders' adherence to Trumpism appears to be primarily opportunistic, not ideological,⁸¹ but that does not explain why the Republican base appears to be fully invested in even the most outrageous aspects of Trumpism. Instead, the fantasmatic logic behind the Trumpist discourse seems to have gained hegemonic status with the GOP, implying a position that portrays Trump not just as *one* option among many, but as *the* only alternative to absolute chaos and insecurity.

Conclusion

This chapter set out to analyze Trumpist discourse from the perspective of Lacanian theory, putting the notions of fantasy, enjoyment and dislocation at center stage in order to elucidate the nexus between anxiety, identity and affect. It attempted to illustrate three arguments: First, the articulation of national identity remains an ongoing and ultimately futile endeavor. It rests on lack and can never reach ultimate closure. In effect, the notion of an intrinsically constituted, "real" American identity loses all its meaning, since it can only be conceived as an identity vis-à-vis the difference that puts it in opposition to something else. This means, second, that antagonism plays a crucial role in this process. Constructing an outside as an antagonist aims at securing the nation's identity by building it on anxiety and fear. Especially in a moment of crisis or discursive dislocation, previously taken-for-granted practices are

⁸¹ A telling example is Senator Ted Cruz who first repeatedly referred to 1/6 as a "violent terrorist attack," just to then backpedal on Tucker Carlson's FOX News show and apologize for his own "sloppy phrasing." In a similar vein, Cruz even claimed that Senate minority leader Mitch McConnell's characterization of 1/6 as a "violent insurrection" was "political propaganda;" see <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/ted-cruz-mitch-mconnell-insurrection-b2012525.html>.

innovatively articulated and new political communities constructed. Third, the articulation of anxiety is related to what Lacan has conceptualized as enjoyment, implying that every effort to resolve the lack that rests within identity will necessarily fail. Eventually, Trumpist discourse shows its problematic ethical dimension at this point: It can only survive by creating the fantasmatic illusion of a stable identity, that is, by concealing the contingent and highly heterogeneous character of the American society and reducing it to an underlying sameness. However, as the analysis has shown, this comes down to a dangerous and extremely divisive endeavour.