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Abstract

Americans are experiencing difficult challenges during the US transition away from decades of relative primacy and prosperity. The fact is that globalization, technology, and waning unipolarity differentially impact people, with certain groups disproportionately disadvantaged. These individuals encounter diminishing likelihood of upward mobility and flagging social status. The situation and its consequences can be understood as a liminal condition in which individuals and groups transition to another identity. During this precarious time, people often embrace manipulative politicians, or tricksters, who theatricalize the circumstances, distort the real source of difficulties, and offer fixes that demonize others. Donald Trump now performs as the trickster clown with his misleading appeals and promises to individuals caught in a seemingly permanent trap of socio-economic deterioration. While some conservative scholars and politicians challenge his clownish behavior, a significant number of Americans mimic his attitude, embrace his mockery of established government, and rally to punish the blame-worthy.

Transition, Identity, and Division in the United States

Americans simultaneously confront multiple transitions within their global, political, economic, and social spheres. At the United States' nation-state level, the unipolar moment of the 1990s has passed; both its military and economic primacy are in at least relative decline. New global forces also confront the United States with complex outcomes: free trade and modern technology offer benefits and challenges. Indeed, these forces also have differential domestic outcomes, with some individuals benefitting from trade and technology while other people lose jobs or status. Moreover, fundamentally domestic socio-economic transitions compound the effects of these global phenomena. Decades-long campaigns for equal opportunity in education and employment has raised the status of minorities, and especially women. In particular, working- and middle-class white men feel angry and lost amidst these multiple transitions. They are also alienated from national leaders and, in recent years, have rallied around the Tea Party movement to elect outsiders who are willing to support radically change to government and its policy. Indeed, Ted Cruz rose through the political ranks as a Tea Party darling. Yet now it is Donald Trump who captures the trust of Americans frustrated with the trap of domestic and global socio-economic transitions.

Donald Trump, as the quasi-master of ceremonies at his campaign events, yells 'Build that…' and crowds, mimicking what they know, shout 'wall'. He targets dissenters, ranting 'Get him…' and the supporters, imitating previous rallies, respond 'out of here'. These political gatherings sometimes become violent spectacles in which attendees, rather than listening to platform statements, verbally and physically abuse and exile dissenters. In so doing, solutions appear simple - banish certain people. Participants need not wait for a candidate to be elected or

a policy to be implemented because they feel empowered through the mutual reaffirmation of their righteousness and superiority despite the uncertainties that have befallen them.

Of course, much as with the recent Brexit referendum, serious policymakers appreciate that simplistic solutions to difficult situations are often unrealizable fantasies which manipulative politicians perpetuate for their own aggrandizement. Trump now appears as such a politician, a trickster who lacks the knowledge, insight, wisdom, or experience to address the complexities of the situation. Yet, as a trickster, Trump does possess the rhetorical skill, clownish mannerisms, bullying demeanor, and occasionally pornographic humor to dupe individuals desperately seeking relief from their current ambiguous social status (Horvath, 2010: 50, 62-63; Szakolczai, 2013: 76-79; Turner, 1982: 9).

Trump's emotional "appeal" as a candidate arises from his promise that it is easy to 'Make America Great Again', provided the voters dump their stupid and weak leadership. Trump's alluring charm relates to his consoling message that his supporters are virtuous, right, and hard-working, that other countries and groups unjustly created the current predicament, and that he can lead them out of the turmoil and confusion. Thus, Trump skillfully taps the emotions of his primarily white, male, working-class followers. They long felt lost and neglected in a changing America; Trump now offers these men a respectable, if not superior, individual and group status.

The disorientation and subsequent disenchantment of these followers vary with their age and are difficult to date precisely, but have festered with certain critical events and policies. Clearly, the past five decades in the United States have marked a time of transition which contributes to the ambiguity of the identity and influence of many white men. The 1960s civil and voting rights movements, the 1970s women's equality movement, and the 1980s gay rights movement mark challenges to the preferential status of the traditional white American male. Policies such as affirmative action and Title IX often seem unjust. At the same time, working- and middle-class males also confront the results of free trade, globalization, and the revolutions in technology, computers, and robots. Cumulatively, these processes have led to job losses, particularly for the working class. Specifically related phenomena are the decline in full-time jobs, the growth of contract work with limited benefits, and the disappearing prospect of upward mobility. Globalization not only sent factory jobs abroad, but brought talented immigrants to America. Immigrants, too, are targets of Trump's supporters (Smith, 2016).

While all Americans must transition through the US's relative decline of global prestige and power, the impact is differential and, when disaggregated, men more so than women, the working class more so than the capital class, and the high school-educated more so than the college-educated, are hurt (Reeves, 2014; Thompson, 2016). While most Americans realize transition is underway, for certain Americans the consequences are devastating; the situation appears a permanent trap.

Notable other developments also tend to disturb the self-identity of these white American males. The events of 9/11 and subsequent inability to build democracy and/or defeat enemies raise doubts regarding American exceptionalism. Challenges to homeland security introduce uncertainties about Americans' ability to defend home and hearth. The Supreme Court, once white Protestant men, now includes three women (two Jewish and one Puerto Rican Catholic) and five men who are either Catholic or Jewish, one of whom is black; there are no white Protestants on the court. Finally, Barack Obama's 2008 election and 2012 re-election

confirmed the perception of the demise of the status of the white male. The birther movement and its denial of Obama's legitimacy as president relate to this perspective (Davison, 2014: 214). White American males are experiencing the transition of the social order which has existed since the country's founding. The status of some women and minorities has improved, while economic opportunities, especially for working-class males, decline. The differential experience of groups during the transition contributes to complexity regarding the identity of Americans. Rather than a singular experience, outcome, and identity, a schismatic one exists (Bateson, 1958: 175-177). In turn, this schismogenesis reinforces the tendency to label and blame one another. The practice was well illustrated in the 'White Lives Matter' and 'All Lives Matter' reactions to the 'Black Lives Matter' campaign.

Liminal and Trapped Americans

Liminality is an anthropological and sociological concept that can help explain the current situation that white male Trump supporters sense that they confront. Liminality describes the collapse of a previous order, and the ensuing confusion and panic about impending catastrophe (Turner, 1969: 94-106). Liminality often leads to the subordination of rationality and logic, and consequently the ability to perceive illusory causalities (Tarde, 1903). Liminal individuals and groups view themselves as victims and, as such, afford themselves amidst the chaos and void the right (perhaps the obligation) to act in an irresponsible and lawless fashion to restore freedom and order (Girard, 1972). Consequently, liminal individuals are susceptible to leaders who position themselves as warriors and martyrs willing to fight and suffer for them to reclaim their lost central role in society. Such tricksters incite individuals to mimic their behavior and, in such a way, offer a group identity, as all their followers imitate the same exploits. Manipulative politicians, tricksters such as Trump, can deceive these confused and frightened individuals. Trump claims he is willing to finance his own campaign to return these Americans to greatness. He defines himself as a warrior who will fight for them against Muslims, Mexicans, Chinese, and corruption inside the Beltway. Although real problems exist, such as the loss of jobs in industry or the decline of opportunities for upward mobility, the politician as trickster does not identify honest solutions to these problems because the trickster does not accurately identify the source of the problems. Real problems exist, but the trickster simplifies causes and manufactures solutions. Job loss – build a wall!

The virulent response of certain white males to their liminal condition first became evident with the Tea Party movement which gained intensity and strength after the election of Obama. Note, Tea Partiers formed an amorphous network, not a single, unified Tea Party. One could conjecture that, for the Tea Partiers, it was the election of Obama that marked the final break with 'original' America (Davison, 2014: 205). They entered a liminal state in which they sought their freedom from the outcomes and policies of the US political system that, in their minds, made them increasingly less free while making their lives increasingly chaotic and dangerous. The nature of the movement, with all Tea Partiers equal (indeed where an explicit political party hierarchy is rejected) suggests their convictions regarding laissez faire, big business, and big politics. Tea Partiers believed a return to stability is only possible with a reversal of many recent policies. They especially resent government programs for the poor and marginalized, whom they perceive as noncontributing and undeserving (Skocpol, Coggin, and Williamson,

2013: 26). They reject progressive taxes, the federal healthcare law, federal anti-discrimination laws and, perhaps most distressing, the election of a bicultural, biracial president. His election cast them into a void of confusion and darkness, and the beginning of the war to take back America. Indeed, Tea Party congressman Steve Stockman (R-TX) characterized Obama's policies as an "existential threat to this nation" (Wing, 2013).

Tea Partiers' inability to rationally face the confusion and darkness of the emerging societal order is highlighted by their differences, not merely with Democrats or liberals, but with other Republicans and conservatives. Republican Congressional leadership condemned their willingness to default on the debt. Millennial Republicans reject their suspicion of climate change. Some fiscal conservatives, particularly Log Cabin Republicans, rebuff the seeming inconsistency which calls for extensive legislating of morality while advocating minimal government intervention in the economy. Yet Tea Partiers' primary concern seemed to be the impossible: a return to the pre-liminal, pre-Obama presidency America. This is captured in their focus on the impeachment of Obama for his "faked" birth certificate, unconstitutional Affordable Care Act, alleged Benghazi cover-up, threats to the second Amendment, and NSA surveillance. For many years, the only resolution of the Tea Partiers' liminal state was an Obama impeachment because then the United States could return to an America without a black president who mobilizes not only black citizens but also young, cosmopolitan, secular, and minority voters who possess a different preference for the emerging future. Obama's impeachment never came, however, and thus Tea Partiers remained in a liminal state, searching for a reality beyond an America moving toward equal rights for women and minorities, secularism, post-modern/material values, and a globalized high-tech economy. Both the myths of Horatio Alger and American exceptionalism seem to be fading. Yet Trump's promise to Make America Great Again' perpetuates these myths amidst the liminality (Reeves, 2014).

Trump's followers share many of the laments, characteristics, and utopian fantasies of the Tea Partiers. The demographic characteristics of Tea Partiers are interesting because their higher than average educational and income levels are unexpected qualities for members of a populist movement struggling to protect tradition. Indeed, the educational levels of Tea Parties tend a bit higher than that of Trump supporters (Smith, 2016). Yet it seems that the Tea Partiers' fear of seemingly uncontrollable change and resentment of paying for the undeserving freeloaders leads them to desire an alternative which necessarily stands opposed to movements for women's rights, immigrants' rights, globalization, multilateralization, environmentalism, and secularization. Tea Partiers are sufficiently well educated to understand that, in a globalized, high-tech, competitive economy, their current socio-economic status might not be achievable for people like them (upper middle class white males) and, to that extent, for their children. They perceive themselves as growing outcasts in a changing America, even though the local context suggests that their immediate communities are unchanged.

Therefore, they hear the trickster's cry for a constant watchfulness against the dangers that engulf them. Trump and his followers accept as necessary actions that, in normal times, would be considered irresponsible, ridiculous, and socially unacceptable (Horvath, 2013). Their beliefs and actions suggest that a sickness infects them and, worse, a pathogenesis grows, as the abnormal becomes the routine (Koselleck, 1988). Thus, America in transition experiences not only a schismogenesis, but also a pathogenesis in which individuals and groups trapped in transition now embrace the extreme responses, ideas, and actions of a pseudo-leader.

Donald Trump the Trickster Clown

Political commentators and Republican Party officials initially dismissed Trump's candidacy as a publicity stunt. They perceived him as a showman and clown. Indeed, Trump's background supports such misgivings. As a real estate scion, Trump made his money in speculative investments rather than productive enterprises that add value and jobs to the economy. He sometimes engaged in turbulent deals that ended in lawsuits. He later served as a bullying mentor and boss on the reality program *The Apprentice*, where he led young employees through a transition. Additionally, Trump owned Miss Universe pageants, at which, reports claim, he ridiculed and goaded contestants (Barbaro and Twohey, 2016). Such behavior is consistent with historical accounts of comedians' antics (Szakolczai, 2013). Politically and socially, Trump appeared as something of a chameleon, or perhaps a one-man show frequently changing masks and roles. He has changed party affiliation at least five times, he has flipped on a variety of issues, including abortion and gay rights, and he is in his third marriage. Consider in this light Szakolczai's description of the trickster: 'His behavior is scandalous and irresponsible, seemingly irrational, obsessed with eating and drinking, laughter, sex and violence. Nevertheless he is held by all people in great awe, often considered as a culture hero and second founder of the world' (2015: 224).

Indeed, Trump appears the voice of reason and credibility to his supporters because of his claim to be an outsider – he has not participated in the political process and establishment that they hold responsible for their liminal condition (Szakolczai, 2015: 225; Thompson, 2016). With the election of Obama, Trump became a representative voice of the Birther Movement, which moved him toward the political arena (Parker and Eder, 2016). Again referring to Szakolczai's apt description, '…keeping his cool and using his outsider mind set, he can fake acting as a savior when most people, terrified by what is going on, fail to recognize the difference between the genuine and the fake' (2013: 79).

As a candidate, Trump has theatricalized the campaign in order to intensely engage his followers. His rallies are spectacles. One senses supporters attend not to listen to a speech but to participate in the challenge to their present reality (Szakolczai, 2015: 110). People expect certain gestures and chants; people also anticipate violence from the emotional, often frenzied crowd. The liminality provides fertile environment for imitative chants and responses, characteristic of individuals seeking a new group identity and social status (Szakolczai, 2015: 224). Trump as a mean, clownish trickster knows few bounds as he abusively ridicules people, especially women and minorities (Barbaro and Twohey, 2016). His derisive monikers for his opponents include little Marco, low-energy Jeb, lying Ted, crooked Hillary, and crazy Bernie. He also levelled attacks at other individuals and groups, calling Rosie O'Donnell a slob, labelling Mexicans as rapists, and implicitly referring to moderator Megyn Kelly's menstruation. Perhaps most illustrative of the trickster clown, Trump physically imitated a disabled reporter while laughingly relating to his supporters: 'You should have seen this guy.'

Trump's statements have dismissed the desirability of nuclear non-proliferation, suggested the killing of terrorists' families, and favored the deportation of Muslims and

Mexicans. He also has challenged the impartiality of an American judge of Mexican descent. Trump portrays groups of people as villains. As the master, however, these portrayals create a new viral reality for his supporters. During rallies, he frequently gives a nod to physical violence against dissenters at his rallies. When he asks security to remove individuals, he frequently follows with an aside: 'Try not to hurt him, if you do I'll defend you in court,' or 'knock the crap' out of him. Indeed, Trump's rallies are a liminal space of confusion, chaos, and danger devoid the normal limits of social behavior. The rallies represent a microcosm of the liminal environment in which his followers subsist. Yet Trump's excessive, clownish, chauvinistic, racist trickster behavior mobilizes new voters who feel alone and trivialized.

Ted Cruz: Charismatic Trickster for the Victimized

Ted Cruz, Trump's most competitive challenger, also played the role of trickster. One might even consider that the viral spirit of Cruz as trickster infected Trump. Cruz's followers certainly overlap Trump's supporters, but Cruz attracted many white fundamentalist Christians who saw traditional America slipping into the past before Trump entered the political stage (Thompson, 2016). To the liminal Christians, Cruz touted his orthodoxy, often using biblical language and referencing passages. As Horvath notes regarding tricksters in liminality, they '…often also evoked the intercession of gods…' (2013: 344).

Many of Cruz's supporters also were Tea Partiers, and they tended to constitute the slightly wealthier, slightly better-educated membership. Trump's supporters are more lower class than Cruz's followers (Thompson, 2016). Indeed, Cruz rose in politics as a darling of the Tea Partiers, criticizing government spending and the war on religion. Like Trump, he positioned himself as an outsider, someone not responsible for the policies Tea Partiers criticized. Cruz targeted these policies, but rarely offered solutions. His speeches were remarkably similar, irrespective of the topic. Cruz stood for the grassroots against both Washington and New York values, he vowed to fight back and reignite America's promise, and he believed it was possible with divine intercession. He soothed the crowds with emotional reassurance that they were correct, and that he shared their victimhood (Horvath, 1998). In fact, for Cruz to suggest workable solutions or compromises to the problems which Tea Partiers identified would be to undermine his own position as their leader in this time of suffering. Cruz as a trickster need not take the Tea Partiers anywhere, he need only identify with their situation, and condemn their dark enemies. As Horvath suggests regarding communist leaders and their polities:

> The basic "figuration" (Elias, 1987) of the speeches is the never-ending repetition of the pathological state of being betrayed and of suffering, and the coexistence of this torment with a desire for a future happiness and a readiness to serve this purpose (Horvath, 2013: 338).

Cruz probably recognizes he cannot stop the trends and revolutions in America that move the country away from its history, in which power was held by white men, and more recently America was a superpower. Order (or even multiple orders) collapsed around America and its citizens. They cannot return to the previous order, but leaders such as Cruz can manipulate citizens' unrealistic demands, keeping them in a permanent liminal state in which they continue to protest against gender equality or immigration. Thus, Cruz fits the paradigm of a trickster. He

takes upon himself a cloak of humility, while calling for actions that demand negligence and irresponsibility, such as government shutdowns and debt cancellation. His detrimental filibuster which led to the downgrade of US debt clearly exhibits the excessive behavior of the trickster clown. Former Speaker of the House John Boehner labeled Cruz 'Lucifer' for his rhetoric and actions. Cruz, among establishment Republican leaders, certainly appeared the demonic trickster.

Analysis of Trump, Cruz, and their supporters seems to beg for a comparison with one-time Democratic hopeful Bernie Sanders. Arguably Sanders' potential supporters flounder in the same liminal environment as Trump's backers. Many of Sanders' followers are young adults who face educational debt and employment uncertainty. They worry about the solvency of Social Security. Yet Sanders' approach differentiates him from Trump and Cruz. Most notably, Sanders lacks the trickster appeal because he refrains from abusive campaign tactics and excessive legislative antics. Additionally, while reason certainly exists to question whether Sanders' proposed policies might be successful, his social democratic ideological consistency across issue areas and time suggests he is not a populist trickster.

The Threat of Permanent Liminality

Some thoughtful conservatives oppose Trump and his unrealistic policy suggestions. Party leaders continue to regret and apologize for his trickster antics, scapegoating, and abusiveness. For example, Speaker of the House Paul Ryan has endorsed Trump, but continues to maintain a distance; Ryan recently labeled Trump's comments about Judge Gonzalo Curiel as the 'textbook definition of racism'. Mary Matalin, GOP strategist and political pundit, and George Will, conservative intellectual, each announced decisions to leave the Republican Party. Will specifically focused upon his disgust with Trump's lack of prudence and civility, as well as the party leadership's willingness to work with Trump. Matalin centered on the party's, not Trump's, social agenda, but did add: 'I think he could win in a landslide if he would stop his high schoolboy antics with women.' Past Republican presidential advisors Robert Kagan and Brent Scowcroft have endorsed Clinton as possessing a more realist perspective of US foreign policy and international relations. Finally, Cato Institute executive vice president David Boaz's description of Trump highlights the concern with the trickster's machinations:

> he's the guy, the man on a white horse, who can ride into Washington, fire the stupid people, hire the best people, and fix everything. He doesn't talk about policy or working with Congress. He's effectively vowing to be an American Mussolini (NR Symposium: 2016).

The notion of a trickster in the White House, however, introduces the threat of permanent liminality and its serious consequences. Many of the phenomena which confront America – globalization, competitiveness, demographic shifts – defy simple solutions, but rather require acceptance and management. Only thoughtful and democratic leaders of character can guide the United States through the economic, social, and global transitions underway (see Ringmar, 2016). The antics and policies of Trump and other tricksters do not address the source of the issues, but rather seek scapegoats. With such tricksters as masters, the future of Americans seems to be locked in the current troubled, conflictual environment. A trickster's interest focuses upon maintenance of turmoil because the liminal situation justifies their role. Thus, tricksters such as

Trump concentrate upon claims that divide the country, thereby amplify the schismogenesis. The threat of the trickster Trump is not only that America remains in permanent liminality, but that the dangerous void unleashes other dark forces.

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