

FEATURED ESSAY

The Ecstatic Edge of Politics: Sociology and Donald Trump

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The day before the Louisiana Republican primary in March 2016, I watched Donald Trump's Boeing 757 descend from the sky at the Lakefront Airport in New Orleans, Louisiana. Inside the crowded hangar, Elton John's "Rocket Man" was playing. Red, white, and blue strobe lights roved sideways and up. Cell phones snapped photos of the blond-haired candidate as he stood before thousands waving and shaking signs that read MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN. A small, wiry man bearing this sign with both hands, eyes afire, called out to all within earshot, "To be in the presence of such a man! To be in the presence of such a man." There seemed in this man's call, I wrote in my field notes—part of a five year ethnographic study of Tea Party supporters in Louisiana—a note of reverence, even ecstasy (Hochschild 2016:224). How do we understand the states of mind and situations of those to whom Donald Trump appeals? How does such emotional appeal work? Whatever Trump's future, he has touched a cultural nerve we sociologists need to study. In this essay, I explore illuminating works in and around sociology before venturing an interpretation of my own.

In *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, the historian Richard Hofstadter (1996) traced the relationship between paranoid political rhetoric and "style of mind" as these periodically emerged in the United States through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The leader expressing such a style, he says, "does not see social conflict as something to be mediated and compromised, in the manner of the working politician. Since what is at stake is always a conflict between absolute good and absolute evil, what is necessary is not compromise but the will to fight things out to a finish. . . . This demand for

total triumph leads to the formulation of hopelessly unrealistic goals, and since these goals are not even remotely attainable, failure constantly heightens the paranoid's sense of frustration. Even partial success leaves him with the same feeling of powerlessness with which he began, and this in turn only strengthens his awareness of the vast and terrifying quality of the enemy he opposes" (p. 31).

Propelling such movements, he argues, is not just economic deprivation as narrowly conceived, but the loss of an older America, inward-turned, Protestant, secure, busy turning the wheel of a thriving local capitalism. As one of the original so-called birthers (who questioned President Obama's place of birth and religion) and as one who has extended this suspicion to Hillary Clinton's religion, Donald Trump fits in Hofstadter's "paranoid style." Still, Trump's appeal reaches far beyond the style of mind through which it is expressed.

Updating Hofstadter, the excellent *The Tea Party and the Remaking of Republican Conservatism* by Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson (2012) takes an orchestral view of a wide array of forces, both predisposing and precipitating. The ferment of social class and status discontent, the Fox TV effect, the post-2008 bailout, highly upsetting to many, the financial backing of the oil billionaires David and Charles Koch—all these have led to the rise of the Tea Party. Part of supporters' discontent, moreover, derives from their unsuccessful struggle for recognition—a key fact of social life noted by Frankfurt School philosopher Axel Honneth (1995).

In follow-up research on the power of Koch funding, Skocpol and Alexander Hertel-Fernandez (2016) take an

“organizational control” perspective. It is not simply the large amount of money the Kochs donate to the right wing that matters, they argue, but the structure the Kochs have set up, coordinating the activities of think-tank researchers, lobbyists, candidates, and staffers, writers, and media advisors. For taken as a whole, this entire network is nothing less than a privatized political party whose budget now dwarfs that of the Republican Party.

Similarly, in *Off Center: The Republican Revolution and the Erosion of American Democracy*, political scientists Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson (2005) take us into the world of right-wing power brokers who develop strategies for blocking or advancing legislation through Congress. Yet Donald Trump rose without such a vast funding and organizational apparatus, and not because of them. Indeed, David Koch has publically declared that he might vote for Hillary Clinton. So, more is going on than we could explain through the works of activist right-wing donors.

Taking another approach, University of Virginia social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, in his 2012 book *The Righteous Mind*, critiques an overly rationalist approach and focuses on intuition. This, he argues, is informed by six moral values that underlie political choice—care, fairness, liberty, loyalty, authority, and sanctity. Some of these values, like care and fairness, overlap with liberal values, he argues, while others do not. Conservatives may not vote their economic interests, Haidt argues, but they do vote their “moral interests,” which we ignore at our peril. In *Women of the New Right*, Rebecca E. Klatch offers us the right-wing woman’s perspective on moral interest.

But by itself, an inventory of conservative moral values—especially the value placed on sanctity and care—can’t explain the rise of Donald Trump. A recent Gallup poll found that 66 percent of “highly religious” white Protestant Republicans support Trump. In the primaries, Trump won far more votes than the deeply religious Ted Cruz, an evangelical pastor’s son. Yet Trump is the most conspicuously irreligious presidential candidate in years. He says he has never asked God for forgiveness: “If I do something wrong . . . I just go on and try

and make it right. I don’t bring God into that picture” (Boorstein 2016).

When asked, he was unable to name his favorite book in the Bible and when asked to name a favorite Bible verse, he demurred. At one point he claimed to belong to the Marble Collegiate Church in Manhattan, but the church later released a statement saying that he was “not an active member at this time.” His third and current wife, a model, has posed in buttock-bearing thongs, hardly the look of a pious First Lady. He has written in *The Art of the Comeback*, “If I told the real stories of my experiences with women, often seemingly very happily married and important women, this book would be a guaranteed best-seller” (Lozada 2015). If right-leaning candidates gain followers by appealing to or exemplifying values, then values—at least those of care and sanctity—can’t be the central explanation for the rise of Donald Trump.

But perhaps values enter into a candidate’s appeal more indirectly. In *Metaphors We Live By*, cognitive linguist George Lakoff (1980) focuses on the ways we see and think through metaphor—a useful idea to which I’ll return. In *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think*, Lakoff (2002) argues that politics is a veiled metaphor for the type of family we grow up in. Right-wingers see the world through the imagery of the “strict father” family, Lakoff argues, and liberals see it through that of the “nurturant parent family.” For the conservative, the strict father family imposes a hierarchical moral order upon an otherwise chaotic world; hence the embrace of guns, the death penalty, and the subordination of women. Extending his argument to Trump in an article for the *Huffington Post*, Lakoff (2016) rightly shows how Trump fits the model of the “strict father.” Every one of Trump’s policies—to fence off Mexicans, to bar Muslims, to slap tariffs on the Chinese—suggests strict and fearless authority.

But other Republican presidential candidates fit the strict father model too. Senator Lindsey Graham called for “boots on the ground” in the Middle East. Texas Governor Rick Perry advocated “open carry” gun laws. New Jersey Governor Chris Christie harshly and contemptuously attacked rival candidate, Marco Rubio. In different ways,

nearly all the Republican candidates fit Lakoff's image of the strict father. We are left to explain the special appeal of the particular *kind* of strict father Donald Trump is.

So we can turn to what is by far the most common explanation of Trump's rise: his appeal to economic and racial interests. In economic terms, many among the Tea Party advocates I interviewed (many had backed other candidates in the primary, but almost all planned to vote for Trump) had risen from modest circumstances and done well—the daughter of a plant worker who rose to become an accountant, a small farmer who became a plant engineer, a carpenter who became a successful contractor. They fit the profile—high income relative to low education—outlined by Seymour Martin Lipset in his 1955 *The Radical Right: A Problem for American Democracy*.¹

Increased competition for good, steady jobs in the era of a shrinking middle class has put unrelenting pressure on a white working class already bravely struggling with family disruption, lowered wages, and a grim move, described by the philosopher Jerald Wallulis (1998), from a life of marriage and employment to that of marriageability and employability. As many liberal analysts rightly observe, this structural stress upon the white working class has led whites to fear that what they have seen affect the black lower class could hit them next. This fear also exacerbates preexisting fear and disdain for non-whites and non-Christians—especially Mexicans and Muslims.

Some describe Trump followers as white, male, and blue collar. One study found that he won the support of 50 percent of voters making less than \$50,000 (Thompson 2016). But according to another estimate derived from primary voter exit polls and census data, the median family income of the Trump supporter, as reflected in the primary polls in 23 states, was \$72,000—higher than the national median (\$56,000) and higher than the median for Clinton and Sanders voters (\$61,000) (Silver 2016).

To sum it up so far, Hofstadter draws us out of an ahistorical corner and focuses on a "style of mind." Skocpol and Williams rightly move our focus away from identity politics and narrow economic loss to the multiple sources of right-wing discontent. But it matters too, Honneth might observe, that Tea Party advocates feel that their discontent has gone unrecognized. Skocpol's focus on the Kochs' money and organization explains the vast airport and air fleet, so to speak, but not the take-off of the occupant of the Trump plane. The psychologist Haidt draws us out of our rationalistic corner, refocusing us on the intuitive dimension of politics, although we need to move beyond an inventorying approach. Lakoff attunes us to metaphor, and like the other theorists, recalls Weber's *verstehen* approach to social inquiry. Drawn from history, philosophy, linguistics, and sociology, such guides best direct our sociological radar as we inquire further into the still-mysterious appeal of Donald Trump.

The Deep Story

In the course of five years of field work with Tea Party supporters in southwestern Louisiana, I struck upon a three-part method. First, I spent a great deal of time interviewing and socializing with a core group of some 40 supporters of the Tea Party. I played cards, went fishing, visited schools and graveyards with them, and spent much time doing what they called "visiting." I followed the campaign trail of a Tea Party Congressional candidate and his Republican rival, attended meetings of the Republican Women of Southwest Louisiana, and attended services in Pentecostal and Baptist churches. Altogether I interviewed 60 Louisianans, 40 of them Tea Party, and collected interviews that when transcribed came to more than 4600 pages.

Second, I devised what I call a deep story—a metaphor-based narrative, the details of which corresponded to the emotions experienced by my informants. A deep story is a *feels-as-if* story—stripped of facts and moral judgment. It tells us what participants think it's normal to feel (everyone does) and normative to feel (everyone should): envy, anxiety, grief, anger, and suspicion.

¹ Also see Lipset and Raab (1971), *Politics of Unreason: Right Wing Extremism in America, 1790–1960*.

Like a play, the deep story unfolds, episode by episode. Third, I returned to my informants and tried the story out on them to see if it fit what they feel. This deep story is not, I believe, extrinsic to politics; it is the basis of politics. However they appear to us, disputes about politics are, I think, at bottom contests between different deep stories. Such stories don't substitute for the explanations offered by the thinkers I've reviewed, but they describe the mechanism through which such forces structure political appeal.

Here now is the deep story of the far right:

You are standing in a long line leading up a hill, as in a pilgrimage, patient but weary. You are in the middle of this line, along with others who are also white, older, Christian, native-born, and predominantly male, some with college degrees, some not. At the crest of the hill is the American Dream, the goal of everyone waiting in line, a standard of living higher than that your parents enjoyed. Many behind you in line are people of color—poor, young and old, mainly without college degrees. You wish them well, but your attention is trained on those ahead of you. And now you notice the line isn't moving. In fact, is it moving backward?

You've suffered. You've had marriage problems, and you are helping out a troubled sibling and an ill co-worker. Your church has seen you through hard times. You've shown strong character, and the American Dream is a badge of moral honor, as you see it, for that.

But look! Some people are coming from behind and cutting in line ahead of you! As they cut in, you are being moved back. How can they just do that? You're following the rules. They aren't. Who are they? They are black. They are brown. They are career-driven women, helped by Affirmative Action programs.

The liberal government wants you to believe they have a right to cut ahead. You've heard stories of oppressed blacks, dominated women, weary immigrants, closeted gays, desperate Syrian refugees. But at some point, you say to yourself, we

have to build a wall against more sympathy. You feel like a refugee yourself.

You're a compassionate person. But now you've been asked to extend your sympathy to all the people who have cut in line ahead of you. And who's supervising the line? It's a black man whose middle name is Hussein. He's waving the line cutters on. He's on their side. He's their president, not yours. What's more, all the many things the federal government does to help them don't help you. Should the government really help anyone? Beyond that, from ahead in line, you hear people calling you insulting names: "Crazy redneck!" "White trash!" "Ignorant southern Bible-thumper!" You don't recognize yourself in how others see you. You are a stranger in your own land. Who recognizes this?

I check back with my Louisiana informants to see whether the deep story resonates with them. One said "I live your analogy." Another told me, "You've read my mind." Yet another said, "You have it right, but you've left out the fact that the people being cut in on are *paying taxes* that go to the people cutting in line!" Another said, "You didn't finish the story. After a while, the people get fed up and form their *own* line with their *own* leader." In his interviews with Tea Party members in New York and New Jersey, the sociologist Nils Kumkar found spontaneous mention of the idea of annoyance at others cutting in line.

What does the deep story tell us about political appeal? Seen through a Lakoffian lens, the line cutters were upstart younger siblings clamoring for extra favors, in relation to whom the line-waiters felt "relatively deprived," as Stanley Stouffer would note (Pettigrew 2015). At the same time, the waiters-in-line felt home alone, abandoned by a parental federal government. In this context—with less opportunity to go around, more competition for it, home alone—they wanted others to recognize their deep story.

But others didn't recognize their story. So they were seen as having the "wrong" feelings. Here I found great usefulness in the concept of feeling rules, which I have explored in my book, *The Managed Heart* ([1983] 2012). From their point of view,

others had established the “right”—politically correct—way to feel. Beyond this, they felt the object of contempt for having such feelings—they felt they were seen as uncaring, racist, homophobic, sexist. Such contempt drove them further into the resentful company of the like-minded. Who in the realm of power, they wondered, could recognize their deep story and address the envy, anxiety, suspicion, sadness, and anger it evoked? If the strength of a leader’s appeal lies in the needs of those appealed to, then I believe the suppression of the deep story of the southern, white working- and middle-class people I came to know, their sense of being invisible and forgotten, was the basis of Trump’s appeal.

Pulling the Covers off the Deep Story

More than other candidates, Donald Trump fits the classic description of a charismatic leader, as Weber defined it. While pundits search without success for well-developed public policies in the bureaucratic-rational tradition, Trump offers himself instead as the *personal messenger* of his followers. While many look for the promise of stability, Trump is unpredictable. While people search for a clear set of advisors who could guide him on the great complexities of policy, Trump, like other charismatic leaders, deliberately dispenses with any hierarchy that would detract from the main source of authority: himself. Followers forgive, one after another, flagrant flaws in such a “messenger” because he is *their* messenger and he recognizes their suppressed, as they see it, deep story.

But how does Trump, or any other charismatic leader, lay claim to being—and get received as—the messenger of a social group’s deep story? By intuitively sensing and inhabiting a preexisting, recognizable cultural paradigm for conveying emotion. In this case, I believe Trump has intuitively fitted himself into a secular version of the Rapture. A 2010 Pew Research Center report observed that 41 percent of all Americans surveyed expected a Second Coming “probably” or “definitely” by 2050, as did 58 percent of white evangelicals—many of whom are followers of Trump.

Believers in the Rapture think that at any time, the world will come to an end. When

it does, believers who have been chosen by God will ascend to heaven to live with Him forever. Non-believers face chaos and destruction in an earth turned to hell. From the 1970s on, there has been a growing popular Rapture culture, promoted through the nation’s 250 Christian television stations and 1,600 Christian radio stations. Inspired by a 1972 film, *A Thief in the Night*, and three sequels seen by an estimated 300 million people, Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins wrote sixteen best-selling novels, the *Left Behind* series, which have sold over 65 million copies. There have followed Rapture-oriented children’s books, a video game, audio books, graphic novels, and more films, the latest featuring Nicholas Cage in 2014. Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia, where Donald Trump spoke before 11,000 people, features a website, GodTube.com, on which 500 Rapture videos appear. In one, a minister, open Bible in hand, predicts that the Rapture could come next week . . . today . . . any t . . . In a flash, he and most of his congregation vanish. In another video, a disbelieving mother ridicules her pious son, who is suddenly raptured up to Heaven, leaving her to face her terrible mistake. In yet another, a young man from a Christian dirt track racing organization (“Race to the Rapture”) talks of assembling his all-aluminum V8 racing car in order to spread word of the Rapture.

For those outside evangelical culture, it is easy to dismiss the Rapture as magical thinking. But we can best understand it, I believe, following Lakoff again, as *metaphorical thinking* about real events on earth. Well-paid, union-protected, plentiful, secure blue and white collar jobs *have* come to an end. With laws allowing abortion and homosexual marriage, transgender people using their chosen bathroom, and a rise in the religiously unaffiliated, a former cultural world has also come to an end. In light of the shrinking proportion of whites in the American population, their demographic world is approaching an end, too. While some endings are gradual, others are sudden. A factory closes. A company downsizes. A house is foreclosed. A Supreme Court decides.

The Rapture opens a great split between saved and damned, with no one left in between. This eerily echoes the growing split between America’s rich and poor, with

a shrinking middle class between them. In the face of this anxiety-provoking reality, the Rapture offers, I think, a dream of escape up and away from hell below. Invisible to many liberals and non-believers, the Rapture is a narrative of predicted future just as a deep story is a narrative of an as-it-has-felt past.

Within the cultural iconography of the Rapture, Donald Trump has positioned himself as an Old Testament-style supreme judge who determines who goes to heaven and hell. In "The Apprentice," Trump's wildly popular reality TV show that ran for 16 years, contestants compete to win a \$250,000-a-year management job, a secular heaven. Trump sits at a table in a corporate boardroom, in black suit and tie, lips pursed, the judge. He tells contestants the qualities he wants in a "good leader": be a gladiator, take it to the limit, be loyal. Later, on judgment day, he tells one man who had been put in charge of two other contestants, "Sam, you're no longer with us. You're fired." Then, addressing Sam's two subordinates, Trump says, "You guys go up." To Sam he says, "You go down."

As part owner of the Miss USA, Miss Teen USA, and Miss Universe pageants, Trump has passed judgment in other areas as well. Miss Washington State wins; Miss Massachusetts loses. Miss USA wins; Miss Italy loses. During his presidential campaign, Trump has promoted some journalists and banished others: the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* have on occasion been "left behind." At that rally in New Orleans, Trump "fired" Black Lives Matter protesters, calling on security to "get them out now!" And what is a great wall between Mexico and the U. S. or banning all Muslims from entering the United States but drawing a line between the saved and the left behind? As the ultimate judge in such matters, Trump has assigned himself a central role in a narrative that very closely parallels the Rapture. In doing so, as charismatic leaders do, Trump claims to foresee—and to grieve with followers about—the troubling times they see ahead. He offers to win for his followers, it may not be too much to suggest, a secular "heaven" such as his own. Trump Tower penthouse, for example, has floor-to-ceiling marble, crystal chandeliers, pillars and statues of gold—which, incidentally,

resemble some online depictions of heaven in the Rapture.

In the end, the Koch-financed set of political organizations Skocpol has analyzed set down the carpet, so to speak, on which some rightist candidate would step forth; but in itself, it did not predict who would step forward upon it. The interest analysts rightly describe the economic and racial pressures impinging on followers that lead them to seek some form of rescue. With Hofstadter and Weber, we appreciate vulnerabilities of status and with Honneth, the yearning for recognition. Indeed, rather than being condemned as narcissism, Trump's continual call for recognition of himself has become a source of appeal among those who yearn for others to recognize their deep story. It is the happy—indeed, rapturous—ending of that story that gives Trump's message its ecstatic edge. Although Trump is nobody's model Christian, he has uncannily appropriated the iconography of belief: images of a long-awaited judgment soon to come, when merciless vengeance will be wreaked on evildoers, wrongs will be righted, and untold blessings delivered to the deserving. This is nothing less than a secular version of the Rapture. To the holders of the deep story, I believe it is a hidden source of Trump's powerful appeal. Whether Donald Trump rises or falls, we need sociology to take up the task of analyzing the rise of the right. And we need our government and society at large to address all the ways millions of American have been—in real life—left behind.

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