

# The Trump Horror Show through Nietzschean Perspectives

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As we now undergo the American nightmare of a Trump presidency, we confront the challenges of a divided country with Trump and his often-frenzied followers constituting an authoritarian populist movement under an uninformed and hot-tempered demagogue. How can the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche help us theorize and overcome the frightening horror show of a Trump presidency? In this paper, I'll argue that Nietzsche's concepts can help in analyzing Trump, his followers, and the Trump phenomenon, and thus can explain the Horror Show of the Trump Presidency.<sup>1</sup>

## 1 Resentment from Nietzsche through Trump

19th century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche believed that all social movements are rooted in the herd psychology of resentment which is directed against superior individuals and classes and the state. In particular, Nietzsche developed a vitriolic attack on the modern state, finding it to be a "new idol" that is "the coldest of all cold monsters," run by annihilators "who continuously lie and relieve"; Everything about it is false, "Nietzsche claims (Nietzsche 1954a: 160–163). Nietzsche consistently attacked as well German nationalism, writing": If one spends oneself on power, grand politics, economic affairs, world commerce, parliamentary institutions, military interests – if one expends oneself in *this* direction the quantum of reason, seriousness, will self-overcoming that one is, then, there will be a shortage in the other direction" i.e. culture, art, religion, and the development of personality (Nietzsche 1968: 62). Trump's rabid followers appear to be a variant of Nietzsche's

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1 In earlier work (Kellner 2016), I examine how Trump embodies Authoritarian Populism and has used racism, nationalism, xenophobia, and the disturbing underside of American politics to mobilize his supporters in his successful Republican primary campaign and in the hotly contested 2016 general election. In a successor volume, (Kellner 2017a), I discuss how Trump won the 2016 U.S. presidential election and describe the assembling of his administration and the horrors of the first 100 days of Trump's reign.

mass men seething with resentment, while Donald Trump himself is a cauldron of resentment, who has deeply internalized a life-time of deep resentments, and thus is able to tap into, articulate, and mobilize the resentments of his followers, in a way that Democrats and other professional politicians have not been able to do.

Many of Trump's followers deeply resent politicians and the political establishment, and Trump's ability to tout himself as outside of the political system was a major theme of his campaign and an apparently successful way to mobilize voters. Hence, Nietzsche's concept of *resentment* is a key category to help make sense of Trump, his followers, and the ascent of Donald J. Trump to the presidency. To be sure, in *The Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche uses resentment as a key to explain the origins of other-worldly religious and an idealistic ethics that Nietzsche opposes. In Nietzsche's genealogy, the weak invented religion and morality to temper and control the strong, thus supplanting master morality with slave morality (Nietzsche 1967).

Now before using Nietzsche's categories to interpret and critique Trump further, I want to concede that you can find passages in Nietzsche that valorize, even celebrate, a Trump as well as attack him, as I intend to do. In *Human-All-Too-Human* and other writings Nietzsche makes a distinction between the "noble" and the "base," and describes the noble as those who are sufficiently strong, determined and fearless to "engage in retaliation" when attacked (Nietzsche 1996). This is close to a self-description, or self-conception, of Trump who prides himself as being a tough guy who will engage in retaliation when attacked, hitting his adversary ten times harder, as Trump has bragged on occasion.

However, precisely here Trump opens himself to a Nietzschean critique as well as celebration, for underlying Trump's bold retaliation is a syndrome of malignant narcissism, aggression, and resentment.<sup>2</sup> The following Trump quotes illustrate his malignant narcissism and aggression, and suggest how Nietzsche's concepts of *resentment* and *revenge* can serve as keys to understanding Trump and his followers:

When somebody challenges you unfairly, fight back—be brutal, be tough—don't take it. It is always important to WIN!

I think everyone's a threat to me.

Everyone that's hit me so far has gone down. They've gone down big league.

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<sup>2</sup> For a Frommian analysis of Trump's malignant narcissism and aggression which I am drawing upon here, see Kellner (2017b).