



Populism and The Danger of Illusion

Coline Covington

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COLINE COVINGTON, Ph.D.

POPULISM AND THE DANGER OF ILLUSION

Abstract. We are living in a time of increasing economic inequalities, disaffection, and fear of powerlessness of global proportions. The response is isolationism, nationalism, and paranoia of what is foreign and other. Fantasies of returning to a time of greatness and supremacy are propounded by politicians in the face of facts. Knowledge and expertise has been corrupted and only emotions tell the truth. The allure of a fantastic leader who offers to “fix” it all is irresistible. The denigration of thought, as we have witnessed throughout history, opens the way to an absolutist, fascist state of mind; reality must conform to fantasy. Is this the start of an era of paranoia? And will the real enemy be the failure to think? This article explores how this political dynamic is implicitly sanctioning the enactment of alt-right fantasies and the serious consequences of a leadership that denies loss and change.

Keywords: populism, inequality, autocracy, anxiety, ego ideal, illusion

... one can live without freedom. Indeed, freedom is the first thing that fearful citizens are prepared to give up. So much so that they often ask to lose it, ask for it to be taken away, banished from their sight, which is why they not only applaud the very person intending to take it from them, they even vote for him.

Xavier Marias, 2017, p. 31

We are living in precarious times. Global politics are shifting—in some places radically—and hazard warnings are appearing on the horizon: North Korea is threatening nuclear attack; the UK is stumbling

towards the cliff edge of Brexit; Erdogan continues his purges of the Gulenists in Turkey; Putin continues his encroachment of the Ukraine; Trump is intent on repudiating the Iran nuclear agreement, threatening to destabilize already fragile Middle Eastern alliances; and we witness, yet again, another genocide, this time in Myanmar. The confluence of powerful autocratic leaders is notable: Putin, Trump, Kim Jong-Un, Duterte, Erdogan, Kabila, Assad, and the list goes on. Globalization and inequality are pulling nations in different directions, threatening boundaries and identities.

Within the United States and the UK, the balance of power is also shifting towards nationalism, xenophobia, and financial protectionism. Alliances are being reconfigured with the rise of nationalism. On October 11, 2017, the “identitarian,” Richard Spencer, marched into Charlottesville for the second time with 50 white supremacists chanting, “Russia is our friend” and “You will not replace us.” Which way will the cards fall? Will strong leaders rise to the fore and keep our borders—and as Obama said, our minds—open, or will populism take another step towards the illusory glories of the past and mindless autocracy?

The political divides we are experiencing today are nothing new historically, but after a relatively long period of stability, we are suddenly faced with large groups who, as some would argue, are blatantly voting against their own interests: the immigrant who votes against further immigration, the single mother who votes against childcare benefits and abortion, the unemployed who vote against socialized health care, and so on. Is this sheer ignorance or is it something more complex and perhaps more sinister?

We—meaning us liberal elites—tend to view this trend as due to largely uneducated, “stupid” masses or what is often seen as a new form of populism. But in failing to understand the psychodynamics of large group behavior, we fail to protect our freedom and we also react mindlessly ourselves, projecting onto those with whom we disagree the dark, emotional forces that actually guide and inform our political life. As Mark Lilla (2016) observes, “The more charmed we have become with our individual psyches, the less adept we have become at understanding the psychology of nations, peoples, religions, and political movements” (loc. 164).

In this article, I am addressing mindlessness as it manifests in large group behavior, what it stems from, and why it is so frightening and dangerous. I am using the word “mindlessness” to mean a state of mind

and related actions that suppress and attack psychic development in a regressive narcissistic retreat. These narcissistic defenses are the omnipotent aspects of our psyche that defend the ego against external threat and fragmentation; the drawbridge is raised, and the castle walls are fortified against invasion and annihilation. Core identity and survival are at stake. Although this initial reaction may serve to stabilize the psyche, there is also the risk that it will overpower the ego and result in internal instability. When the ego is threatened—whether it pertains to the individual or the group—we also turn to a higher authority for security.

I want to start by asking how populist movements across the world have come about and why they seem to be gaining in momentum? In particular, I want to look at the power of illusion and the importance of our collective ego ideal in shaping the way large groups respond to change and loss.

Over a year ago we were bombarded with the slogans, “America is First!” and “Make Britain Great Again!,” which were soon copied by other aspiring populist groups across the world. Like a television advertisement for a new cleanser, nationalism and its new leaders could alone make life whiter than white and restore purity, riches, and power to our lives. Whatever we think of Trump, he is a master at marketing and America is the new product he is selling to disillusioned Americans. Just as Sarah Palin evoked the early days of the pioneers and the plentiful wilderness that belongs to Americans, for Trump, America is the Big Breast that only Americans may possess. It may have seemed elusive in the past, but we can get it back! That’s the message that so many people voted for. “It’s HUGE! It’s TREMENDOUS!”

On Thursday, January 19, I had just finished seeing patients and switched on the news. I saw Donald Trump and his wife Melania disembarking from the military aircraft that had flown them from New York to Washington, DC, for the inauguration the next day. To my astonishment, I burst into tears. I thought I had accepted the fundamental changes that we are now facing globally—not that we hadn’t already been prepared by Brexit and by the rise in anti-immigration and Islamophobia throughout Europe and the United States. With my tears I realized not only how much of my own personal identity was tied up with a particular political and social vision but also what an overwhelming loss is taking place across the world. I also realized that I was now in the position of feeling alienated, disenfranchised, and despairing about the future—the same complex of feelings that had afflicted and driven

those who voted for Trump and Brexit. The tables had suddenly turned, and I knew my life would in certain respects never be the same and that my own illusion that liberalist values had come to stay had been shattered.

Perhaps what has marked the 20th century more than any other century in the past is the idea of progress, the basis for modernity, which has colored most disciplines and our world view in general. This idea, born out of the Enlightenment, became especially appealing with Darwin's theory of evolution, promoting the belief that organisms and social structures advance from the simple to the complex, from crude to refined, and from basic to better. Freud's theory of psychology was founded on evolutionary psychological development, and—on a popular level—we are used to debates about whether and how our society is changing for the better as we hold dear the idea that, like individual development, we can learn from our experience of the past and recognize that history is melioristic, i.e., made better by human effort. This trajectory also has moral implications in terms of our expectations that we have the capacity as members of increasingly civilized countries to behave with greater wisdom and moral rightness than we have done in the past. This vision of increasing wisdom has, however, proved to be a chimera. We only have to recall the words, "Never Again," sworn upon the liberation of Buchenwald, to be reminded of all the genocides that continue to erupt across the world.

Within the Western political arena, the most profound expression of progressivism was articulated in the Declaration of Independence drawn up by the founding fathers of the United States, proclaiming that "all men are created equal" with the right to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." The American Dream sprang from this principle, establishing a vision of governance that would ally the notion of freedom to prosperity, success, and social mobility.¹ In 1931, James Truslow Adams, in his book *The Epic of America*, defined the American Dream as promising a life that "should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement," regardless of social class or birth. The rise of the United States as the most powerful country of the

¹ Mishra points to Voltaire as one of the first influential proponents of the affluent society in his publication of "Le Mondain" in 1736. In extolling the virtues of the good life, Voltaire argued that affluence was a legitimate political and economic goal (Mishra, 2017, pp. 82–83).

last two centuries has led to a pervasive Western view that democracy is best because it promises to make individual lives better and easier. In the wake of both World War I and II, this ideal played a central role in U.S. political and economic thinking.

As living standards notably improved in the 1950s, the American Dream caught on like wildfire, spreading rapidly to different continents. By 1994, even China's premier Deng was reputed to have used the words, "To get rich is glorious," as he ushered in a new era of capitalism. In 1998, Peter Mandelson, speaking at the Labour Party conference, summed up the view of New Labour, saying, "We are intensely relaxed about people getting filthy rich" (as cited in Parker, 2009). This barely disguised the fact that this was a laudable political aspiration. The American Dream, in its different manifestations, has essentially formed the basis for the ideology of globalization and contains the seeds of its destruction. Since World War II, as Pankaj Mishra (2017) points out in *Age of Anger*,

... economic growth was posited as the end-all of political life and the chief marker of progress worldwide, not to mention the gateway to happiness. Communism was totalitarian. Ergo its ideological opponent, American liberalism, represented freedom, which in turn was best advanced by moneymaking. (p. 43)

It does not take a genius to predict that this cannot end well—and that despite the liberal values attached to Western "freedom"—there has also been a regressive self-seeking fantasy that is now unfolding before us.²

There are some now glaringly obvious problems with the materialism that is so closely associated with the American Dream and the new challenges presented by globalization. The world cannot simply go on getting richer and richer—there are limited resources and we also have our own individual limitations. Economists now largely accept that capitalist systems are bound to crash on a recurring basis with the implication that any market system based on expansion will be subject to implosion once it has reached its limit. What is growing is the expectation

² A recent poll of millennials in developed and developing countries shows that young people in developing countries are "far happier than in the west: 90 per cent of Indonesians and 78 per cent of Nigerians said they were happy compared with just 57 percent in Britain and France" (Pota, 2017). Is this difference because developing countries are on the way up, whereas developed countries have reached their limit?

that everyone has a right to more; as opportunities increase, the gap between the very rich and the poor continues to widen, and envy abounds. Economists also tell us that economic growth does not ensure financial stability; the richer a country grows, the greater its economic inequality and—more than any other social factor—this leads to social unrest and instability. Globalization—like its predecessor, industrialization—has irrevocably changed local economies and, what most significant, has eroded local identities. The ubiquitous example is the development of global chain stores that enable us to buy the same product anywhere in the world. Borders between countries and across the world are either being eradicated or redefined as globalism highlights our cultural and economic interdependency.

Ideological lines are no longer drawn between left and right but between globalists and patriots with cultural identity as the central issue. Marine le Pen was among the first politicians to voice the threat of globalization. “Globalists, she charged, want France to be subsumed in a vast, world-encircling ‘magma.’ She and other patriots by contrast, were determined to retain the nation-state as the ‘protective space’ for French citizens” (Ip, 2017). It’s the little guy and French identity itself that are at risk of being swept away in the “magma” of globalization.

If we see Trump’s protectionism and Brexit’s nationalism as a backlash, it is a backlash that stems from what Vamik Volkan, the psychoanalyst who founded political psychology, calls “large group identity anxiety” (Volkan, 2004). This typically appears when a group’s traditional identity is threatened or undermined, thereby triggering anxiety about its physical, cultural, and psychic survival. When individuals are no longer able to aspire to and fulfil the ideals of their social group, the inadequacy and failure experienced within the group creates pressure to heal its narcissistic injuries by reviving a time of past glory. What often follows is that the group searches for a charismatic leader who will promise to restore power and status to the group. The greater the humiliation and threat to the group’s survival, the more the group will be susceptible to the illusion—or fantasy—of supremacy.

In order to understand the power of the Illusion better, I’m going to introduce Freud’s idea of the ego ideal and its role in normal psychological development and what happens when the development of the ego ideal goes wrong—especially in large groups.

The ego ideal is the image within us of who we want to be when we grow up. In the boy, for example, it is the father first; later this broadens

to teachers, sports stars, leaders, or admired others. For the girl, it is her mother and other women she looks up to. Having this image not only encourages us to grow and develop, but it also helps us to separate from mother. In order to give up dependency on mother, the ego ideal gives a boy, for example, the hope that he can be like father in a creative couple with his own wife. Most important, the ego ideal helps us manage loss in our lives. For example, the loss of the breast is compensated for by the ability to feed oneself and the value attributed to this. There is something to strive for that confers esteem and is a reward for learning. The ego ideal is also important in representing the shared values of a community and is aligned with the superego, e.g., it's good to be a sports star, it's bad to be a criminal. The ideal binds groups together in establishing and reinforcing a normative structure; signing up to the ideal means that you are a member of the group and share in its belief system. This is the pathway to belong, to be loved and admired, and fundamentally to identify with the group's distinctive identity and self-esteem.

In the case of individuals, when the ego falls short of its ideal to the point of humiliation, it tries to compensate by being strong or powerful in other ways. For example, the man who has lost his job may try to feel powerful by bullying those around him. It is the behavior we see in toddlers who, as they separate from their mothers, struggle to manage their loss by acting as if they are bigger and stronger than they are with the illusion that the world is the breast they can control. When we feel especially vulnerable, it is natural to wish for a state of omnipotent dependence that will magically provide total care and protection. Freedom brings its own anxieties and insecurities. At this point, the role of the father becomes crucial psychologically in helping the child manage frustration and yield to authority and the limits of reality in order to feel safe and to work with others—that is, to become a member of a family, a team, or a community.

We can understand the populist backlash, as Mishra (2017) suggests, as the frustration and rage resulting from the souring of the American Dream. For most of us, it is clear that we can no longer expect our children to have a higher standard of living; instead, as climate change is confirming, we are heading for much greater hardships worldwide. We are beginning to see the effects of what has been an extended crisis that has been going on for at least the past 50 years. Part of this backlash is the widespread resistance to development and change resulting from disaffection. Learning and the worth of learning are regarded

as pointless, if not to be mistrusted, hence the attack on the “elites” and the “experts” who have misled and cheated their constituents. Because what has been promised has not come true, authority is no longer seen to be helpful and benign, but autocratic and uncaring. Democratic ideals—now aligned in our minds with capitalism and inequality—are, as a result, taking a battering in favor of authoritarianism.

In her recent book, *Happiness for All?*, the economist Carol Graham describes the white working class crisis in the United States as “the black box of no hope, low expectations and little hope for the future” (as cited in Dyer, 2017). Stress and cynicism, along with increasing mortality, is leading to “increasing support for populist and nativist politicians with unrealistic promises.” However, the disillusion of broken promises, lost jobs, and diminishing opportunities is also increasingly prevalent amongst the middle and upper-middle classes. We are now facing a “crisis of hope” that crosses social classes and political sectors. The political scientist, Martial Foucault,

We tend to think that only poorer and less educated people lose because of globalization. It is not always true—those with higher education also often have to take their chances in very competitive sectors and they do not always succeed . . . Marine le Pen says: “I am going to protect you,” and they are convinced that she will. (Wisniewska, Ehrenberg-Shannon, & Wasik, 2017)

The anxiety about being left behind is mitigated by political nostalgia and a wish to revive the idea of a Golden Age that has been lost and can be retrieved. It is a nostalgia created as a defense against loss with the promise that all can be made good again, restored to its former glory, and reflects what Lilla (2016) refers to as

a kind of magical thinking about history. The sufferer believes that a discrete Golden Age existed and that he possesses knowledge of why it ended. But unlike the modern revolutionary whose actions are inspired by a belief in progress and imminent emancipation, the nostalgic revolutionary is unsure how to conceive of the future and act in the present. (loc. 160)

This is vividly apparent by the images presented by political leaders at the moment: Trump harking back to an invincible pre-Vietnam America, May going back to 1956 and the recovery and hope post-World War II

that brought solidarity to the British as a new nation was built, Corbyn promising a return to the 1970s and hope for world peace, and Le Pen returning to a postrevolutionary France ruled by the people and not by the elites.

One of Trump's slogans is, "Let's not let our great country be laughed at anymore." When a large group becomes humiliated, disaffected, or impotent, losing hope for the future, it naturally retrenches into a kind of victim mentality, enabling its members to identify with one another. Everyone is in the same boat and has the same goals—in the case of the UK and the United States, and undoubtedly other parts of the world—to restore what is felt to have been lost. Psychically this is equivalent to the golden days in the child's fantasy when, as a small child, the infant felt omnipotent with the illusion that he or she was in control of the breast—and that the resources needed for the good life belonged to this child. The large group is brought together and strengthened in its identity by this mutual fantasy, a group wish fulfilment of a return to power and plenty. The leader is chosen, not for his or her abilities to lead, but according to the individual's persuasiveness that he or she will fulfil this omnipotent role for the group: The American Dream personified. The id, the pleasure seeking, impulsive part of the psyche, is then allied to the ego ideal and the ego, which normally mediates emotional behavior, and the superego, which judges and sets limits to behavior, are pushed aside and overruled. Feelings are paramount and become the guiding truth, whereas thinking—as it is linked to reality—is denigrated and dismissed. Because loss is effectively denied in political nostalgia, so is reality and this, in itself, becomes an obstacle to creative adaptation and renewal.

Trump's tweets draw us into the realm of "alternative facts." Molding the truth to serve the purpose of the Illusion is the new politically correct position. Trump declares, "Any negative news is fake news." As one Trump supporter admitted, regarding Flynn's cover up of his Russian dealings, there are also "inconvenient truths." Only the group can accord the seal of reality to the "facts," with the result that individual thought is invalid and negated. Arendt points out that when unquestioning adherence to the party line is expected, regardless of what is true or not, then nothing is trustworthy, and no one can make up his or her mind. It deprives the group of being able to think and judge—and ultimately—to act (Arendt, 1967). As the Serbian scholar, Dzijic, argues, bewildering stories and lies "throws dust in the eyes of the public" (Pesic & Simic, 2017). Not knowing what is true and what is not true reinforces the

group's dependency on the leader and the Illusion. Trump has proved himself a master at manipulating the truth. This behavior is a common feature of totalitarian regimes; we are not used to seeing it take root so successfully on democratic soil.

Although in one respect these "facts" can be seen as a distortion of reality, within the mental framework of the large group they are indeed the facts, the *internal* reality, that describe and define the world of the group. They are *emotional* facts; they do not stem from stupidity but from anxiety. We ignore the emotional basis to these "facts" at our peril.

Some people have likened Trump to a strong father—assuming this is what so many of his supporters want. However, the evidence points to the opposite of this. A large part of Trump's appeal is that he is directly opposing paternal authority in the form of regulations and setting limits. Trump has been busy deregulating, imposing emergency legal measures and ignoring due process. He takes action every day—not as a leader, but as an all-powerful mother/demagogue who is saying, I will ensure you (the group) are the greatest and have all that you need, in limitless supply and without the need to cooperate or rely on others—or to be frustrated by others. As one, we will rule the world. "It's great! It's true!" Two fingers to the reality principle. As Richard Spencer, in an interview following Charlottesville, said, "We were connected with Donald Trump on this kind of psychic level. He was the first true authentic nationalist in my lifetime We rode that wave."

The power of the nationalist illusion is that it supports a leader who, in the words of Michael Flynn, Trump's former national security advisor, is "not obsessed with consensus" (Mathews, 2017, p. 12). Instead, it is the leader who determines the consensus. We can see this in Trump's attempt to ban Muslims entering the United States—homeland security can only be enforced with a blanket ban on all members of a religious group, regardless of individual differences and any notion of human rights. What is striking is that Trump's repeated flouting of due process and constitutional rights, despite protests around the world, according to U.S. polls, has majority backing from the U.S. population. We can begin to see for ourselves how the licensing of whatever behavior is condoned in the service of achieving the Illusion/the ideal, can so easily tip over into the commission of atrocities.

Trump's promises eerily echo Hitler's nationalist, quasi-mystical vision, as expressed in a Nazi newspaper during a party congress, "Our divine mission was to lead everyone back to his origins, back to the common Mother. It was truly a divine mission" (Camus, 1951/1971, p. 151).

Trump asserts his supremacy over all, there is “nobody like me.” In his campaign book, *Crippled America: How to Make America Great Again* (2015), he boasts:

Look at how successful I've been doing things my way. I started in a relatively small real estate company based in Brooklyn and made more than \$10 billion dollars. I now live on what is considered one of the best blocks of real estate anywhere in the world. (p. 74)

At the same time, Trump wants to be thought of as “an ordinary guy,” a “blue-collar guy with a big balance sheet.” Trump is the self-made man—the entrepreneur hero—whose success is measured by his money. He also claims to be able to solve all problems—by doing things his way. During Easter of 2016, Trump tweeted, “Another radical Islamic attack, this time in Palestine, targeting Christian women & children. At least 67 dead, 400 injured. I alone can solve.” His power is Messianic and fundamentalist—he alone can lead the American people to the Promised Land. Trump’s megalomania uncannily reflects the ideology of radical Islam and points to similar underlying psychological group dynamics.

The French psychoanalyst, Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, writing in the aftermath of the Third Reich, emphasizes that, psychologically, within a totalitarian structure, the father is overruled and pushed out. The consequence of this is that anything or anyone who threatens the group Illusion of omnipotence is attacked (Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1985). Difference and “the other” must be kept out or obliterated as this inevitably produces internal conflict and envy within the group (“castration” anxiety caused by an awareness of difference). Here we see Freud’s narcissism of minor differences coming into effect—internal solidity and group identity are strengthened by demonizing the other. Steve Bannon, Trump’s former advisor, argues that the only way to “save” the Judeo-Christian West from jihadi Islamic fascism is to effectively overpower (and exterminate) them through armed conflict. This apocalyptic view of the enemy threat creates an immediate cause for group solidarity, as we saw with Hitler’s anti-Semitism.

Chasseguet-Smirgel argues that the psychological power of the totalitarian group is that everyone in the group is equal and there is no parental couple, there is no differentiation between generations or individuals, and no fixed hierarchy of power—instead, there is constant fluidity within a state of fusion: there is the breast/leader and the group/infant. What constitutes a rule of law and state-imposed structures

are supplanted by the will of the leader. In Germany, it was the “will of the Führer” that was the “supreme law.” This fosters the belief that the group is self-generating and needs no one else beside it—leader and people are one, resulting in protectionist defensiveness.

Chasseguet-Smirgel (1985) writes:

“... the leader is the person who activates the primitive wish for the union of ego and ideal,” negating frustration, loss and humiliation (i.e., narcissistic injuries):

He is the promoter of Illusion, he who makes it shimmer before men’s dazzled eyes, he who will bring it to fruition. Times will be changed, the Great Day will arrive The group thirsts less for a leader than for illusions. And it will choose a leader whomsoever promises it the union of the ego and ego ideal. (We will be one with our ideal image of ourselves.) The leader is Cagliostro. There is no absolute ruler who is not the bearer of an ideology. He is in fact the intermediary between the masses and the ideological illusion, and behind the ideology there is always a phantasy of narcissistic assumption. (p. 82)

It then follows that whatever stands in the way of attaining the Illusion or whoever attacks the ideology of the group must be hunted down and exterminated. As we can see vividly with Trump and across Europe, the “other,” the outsider, the foreigner, becomes the repository for hatred and attack. In order to bolster the group’s goodness and purity, it projects greed, sadism, and hatred onto an external enemy. The result, of course, is paranoia. Trump refers to the “carnage” in the United States (a puzzlement to some of us), creating a kind of simulated state of emergency that justifies all out attacks on corrupting influences—inevitably the source of corruption and threat comes from without. Trump’s carnage is also perhaps an ominous vision of what is to come. Since Trump took office, he has launched verbal attacks on Mexico, Australia, and Germany; Iran has been put “on notice,” and North Korea better watch out. And, of course, there is his emergency ban on allowing Muslims into the United States. This is not simply posturing, but an expression of paranoia that is ominously reminiscent of Hitler’s Night of the Living Dead mentality—no sooner had one enemy been vanquished than another one popped up. Flynn captures this paranoid state of mind when he asserts that the United States is facing an “international alliance of evil countries and

movements that is working to destroy us” (Mathews, 2017, p. 11). Demoning the “other” consolidates the unity of the group and gives it a distinct identity. Individual protection and security is traded for submission to the group’s dictates. Submission also “allows each member to feel himself to be, not a minute, undifferentiated particle of a vast whole, but, on the contrary, identified with the totality of the group, thereby conferring on himself an omnipotent ego, a colossal body,” rather than an insignificant bystander. (Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1985, p. 85) The unity of the group brings with it a foretaste of power and the vision of a world without frustration—the realization of nirvana, 72 virgins waiting in the wings.

It is not surprising that those people who feel most alienated and powerless are often the ones who are most attracted to totalitarian structures that rely on the obliteration of individual will. Within the promise of the illusion, there is no individual and there is no loss.

The ways in which leaders understand and respond to large group anxieties are of paramount importance. The leader who can recognize the limits of reality and the loss or perceived loss underlying anxiety will respond differently to the one who promises unlimited power and protection against loss.

To illustrate this point, I’m going to present a vignette from American history that exemplifies different forms of leadership, different ways of dealing with loss, and the consequences of each. Towards the end of the 19th century, the Crow Indians in Montana were facing extinction, like many other Indian tribes (Lear, 2008). As a young boy, the Crow Indian chief, Plenty Coups, had a dream foretelling the disappearance of the buffalo and the extinction of the Crow way of life. Not only did the Crow depend on the buffalo for their material survival but their identity, or their ego ideal, centered on being strong and brave hunters. Facing despair about the future, some years later Plenty Coups had another dream. In this dream, a little bird called the chickadee told Plenty Coups that the tribe needed to be like the chickadee to survive. For the Crow, the chickadee was a bird known for its ability to adapt to different conditions within its environment; it listened carefully and learned to adapt from what it heard. With this new vision, the tribe was able to shift from its traditional ideal of hunting and fighting to adopt a new ideal of listening and learning—a shift that enabled the Crow to maintain its identity as a group while adapting to the new world introduced by the white man.

As a result, unlike many other Indian tribes, the Crow have been able to keep the majority of their land.

In contrast to the Crow Indians, the Sioux Indians became extinct. Their leader, Sitting Bull, insisted that continuing to fight and to fight even harder was the only way to win. His failure to accept their changing reality and to relinquish the tribe's ideal of themselves as warriors proved disastrous. What is vividly portrayed in the stories of these two tribes is the psychological devastation wrought within a group when their ideals cease to be realizable and "they cannot find ideals worthy of internalizing and making their own" (Lear, 2008, p. 140). In facing up to reality and recognizing forces beyond their control, Plenty Coups enabled his tribe to accept loss and to create a new ideal that could be internalized and sustain the tribe's identity in a new form. Sitting Bull tried to short-circuit reality by reinforcing his tribe's ideal as fighters, with a disastrous result.

Although there are not many Plenty Coups who we can identify as world leaders at the moment, we can see how much easier it may be to follow the course of Sitting Bill even if it means eventual extinction.

The reality of loss is undoubtedly painful, but it is also less dangerous than holding on to the illusion that what has been lost can be restored. The historian, Timothy Snyder, in his treatise, *On Tyranny: 20 Lessons from the Twentieth Century*, uses the phrase "the politics of eternity" to describe "the seduction by a mythicized past [that] prevents us from thinking about possible futures" (Snyder, 2017, p. 123). This is a vital point. When we experience loss, we can either try to obliterate it and return in our minds to the "security" of a mythical past, or we can acknowledge it and think about what we need to do to survive and adapt to a new future. This is what politicians in the U.S. elections and the UK Brexit referendum singularly failed to do—and at least in the case of the UK now, politicians are being accused across the board of lacking a vision of the future. As Snyder warns, "If the politics of inevitability is like a coma, the politics of eternity is like hypnosis: We stare at the spinning vortex of cyclical myth until we do something shocking at someone else's orders" (p. 124).

I want to conclude with an observation—and a warning—about what I see as a possible danger in how populism is perceived in the United States. J. D. Vance's book, *Hillbilly Elegy*, quickly rose to the bestseller list soon after it was published (Vance, 2016). It has been lauded—rightfully so—as a painful and impressive account of one man's struggle to climb out of poverty. But it also, paradoxically, reiterates the American

Dream that every individual, just by working hard enough, can rise up the socioeconomic ladder and make a success of life. This is still what Americans—and all those who voted for Trump especially—want to believe. And yet economic indicators highlight that the causes of poverty and increasing inequality are to be found in our present social and political structures. And protectionist economic policies and nationalistic isolationism will not turn the clock back. The American Dream simply doesn't work anymore; by believing it still applies, we only continue to ignore and deny the roots of poverty. Some lucky individuals, like J. D. Vance, will make it out of the poverty trap. Most will not. Perhaps the best thing that the new populist movement can do is to demonstrate our failure to understand that we can't rely on individuals having the perseverance and the guts to climb up the ladder. Populism is giving us a wake-up call to rethink our social structures and our future identity. Whether we can listen, like Plenty Coups, to the warning bells is another matter.

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Coline Covington, Ph.D., holds a B.A. in Political Philosophy from Princeton University, an MPhil in Criminology from Cambridge University, and a Ph.D. in Sociology from the London School of Economics. She worked for nearly 10 years as a consultant with criminal justice agencies throughout England and set up the first UK mediation project between victims and juvenile offenders with the Metropolitan Police in London. She is a training analyst of the Society of Analytical Psychology and the British Psychotherapy Foundation and former chair of the British Psychoanalytic Council as well as a fellow of International Dialogue Initiative (IDI), a think tank formed by Professor Vamik Volkan, Lord Alderdice, and Dr. Robi Friedman to apply psychoanalytic concepts in understanding political conflict. From 2011 to 2013, Coline was Visiting Research Fellow in International Politics and Development at the Open University and a senior scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, DC. Her publications include *Terrorism and War: Unconscious Dynamics of Political Violence* (Karnac, 2002); *Shrinking the News: Headline Stories on the Couch* (Karnac, 2014); *Sabina Spielrein: Forgotten Pioneer of Psychoanalysis*, 2nd edition (Routledge, 2015); and *Everyday Evils: A Psychoanalytic View of Evil and Morality* (Routledge, 2016). She is in private practice in London.