

UC SANTA BARBARA

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Politics, on the Couch

In this, the electoral season of our discontent, we hear something over and over. The wording varies, but it boils down to this: Man, this is crazy. As in, 'You'd have to be crazy to vote for Hillary Clinton.' Or, 'The crazies have come out for Donald Trump.'

This got [Robert Samuels](#) thinking. A former psychoanalyst who is now a lecturer in the [Writing Program](#) at UC Santa Barbara, he frequently encountered people who didn't seem to know much about politics but were enthusiastic nonetheless. "I kept on saying, 'There's something very irrational about people's relationship to politics,' " he said. "Psychoanalysis is often the study of irrational behavior, so I wanted to look at what are some of the irrational tendencies of the different political parties and their followers."

The result of his national examination is "Psychoanalyzing the Left and Right After Donald Trump: Conservatism, Liberalism and Neoliberal Populisms" (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), which uses the tools of psychoanalysis to explain the rise of Trump and what he sees as the liberal failure to provide a political alternative.

Given the length and ubiquity of the election, Samuels had plenty of material to work with. Nobody has provided more material than Trump and his domination of the daily news cycle. The former reality star, Samuels said, exhibits the traits of a narcissist. "The idea is a narcissist is someone who defines himself through how other people see them, so he needs constant feedback from other people and recognition from other people," he said.

Samuels isn't the first to diagnose Trump as a narcissist, but he plows new ground in arguing that the left is not immune to the condition. Applying Freudian theory, he holds that liberals suffer from what he calls an "obsessional narcissism" that feeds a constant need to be rated, ranked and verified. Academia and its rigid hierarchies, he said, is the perfect breeding ground for the condition. "People believe the meritocratic system is working because they're all successful," he explained. "So they say, 'If you go to school and try hard and work hard, you'll do well, just like me.' "

The problem, he noted, is that there aren't sufficient jobs or opportunities for everyone. "People are blind to these problems because they're just basing it on their own experience," Samuels said. This blind spot, he asserts, has led liberals to abandon the working class to cozy up to Wall Street and large corporations.

As for Republicans, Samuels said, a sense of victimhood has provided elites and the working class common ground. "One of the great questions in American politics," he said, "is why have the working-class poor identified with a billionaire like Donald Trump? What connects these two sides of the Republican Party — the wealthy, powerful business people and the poor working-class people? Part of it is a shared sense of being victims. And the victim is always innocent and right, and if you're a victim you can attack other people because you're the victim and you can't be criticized. And so I think it's a really powerful psychological mechanism that a lot of people haven't been able to explain or understand this kind of association between the working class and these wealthy elites."

The Trump phenomenon, despite the gaping political divide it spawned, could still be a good thing for the country, Samuels said. "In psychoanalysis, the idea is you're supposed to free associate; say whatever's on your mind without censoring yourself," he explained. "In some ways he's doing that. He's tearing apart the Republican Party by saying all these things you're not supposed to say in public. Ultimately I think that could be a beneficial thing. Instead of these things being hidden, we have to openly confront them."

In the end, Samuels said, the country will need to think and act globally to repair its psycho-political wounds. The warming climate and trade have no borders, and only unified, worldwide cooperation can address them. "We have a global system now of labor, a global system of immigration, a global climate," he noted. "Ultimately, we're only going to be able to deal with these issue on a global basis. We're going to need

some type of global institutions that are going to be able to have rules and laws that can be enforced.

“We need a new way of thinking about politics and to stop seeing everything as completely based on reason and logic, and understand some of the more irrational and unconscious aspects of politics,” he continued. “And ultimately to start thinking about this idea that we need global solutions.”

About UC Santa Barbara

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