

Abstract

“I saw that beautiful barbed wire go up” President Trump
Populism and the re-desiring of walls.

The fall of the Berlin wall marked the end of an empire. The Berlin Wall was a Master-Signifier. It signified an extreme example of a ‘Society of Prohibition’ (Stavrakakis 2007) where the harsh ‘Law of the Father’ was imposed upon the East Germany people living in a communist-surveillance state. In the West, prior to the 1968 counter-cultural risings, a more benevolent ‘Law of the Father’ had imposed a softer ‘Society of Prohibition’ where the authority of the church and other governing institutions were respected, and the individual socialized to ‘know their place’. The fall of the wall meant that those from the east found themselves in a new place, without an explicit Law of the Father prohibiting their choices. For the ‘Society of Prohibition’ had been replaced by the ‘Society of Commanded Enjoyment’, ushering in a new world of individualism, sexual liberation, freedom and consumer choice. Lacan anticipated the passing of the ‘disciplinary epoch’ and claimed that *Jouissance*, which now included enjoyment, now dominated the social landscape. In the society of commanded enjoyment, the question of how to gain happiness and fulfillment changed. In the disciplinary society, happiness was gained via transgressions of the law of the father or repressing desire to conform to social norms. The question the subject now faced was how to enjoy i.e. what is my mode of *Jouissance*? This is at stake for the subject and society today.

The hippy ideals of freedom and choice became appropriated and turbo-charged by digital capitalism in the late 20th century. Yet the hope that this coupling of ‘democratic-freedom and capitalism’ would triumph and ‘end history’ (Fukuyama 1992) has hit a new wall. Across the west populist, authoritarian and illiberal forces counter the ‘inevitable’ march of progression from authoritarianism to democracy. In China and Russia this de-coupling is now embedded. Praising an “illiberal democracy” as proposed by the Hungarian Prime Minister is now a part of the political landscape.

President Trump’s evocation to ‘Build the Wall’ became a new Master-Signifier of our times. He captured the affective investments of millions across the USA and beyond, propelling him into the Whitehouse. If the M/S of the Berlin Wall falling unleashed a chain of signifiers: freedom, choice, individual rights, consumerism, democracy, capitalism, globalization, opportunity. ‘Building the wall’ was a Master-Signifier that unleashed another chain of signifiers: immigration, protectionism, nativism, insularism, anti-elitism, anti-globalization.

This paper utilizes psychoanalytic theory to map the libidinal economies of Populism, drawing on the Lacanian orientation and presenting the ideas in an accessible way. The paper finishes by making connections between the libidinal economies of populism and those that drive today’s totalizing corporate cultures (Tourish 2002) led by Messiah Leaders (Western 2019). The social and organizational are knotted.

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Bio

Simon Western is an independent academic and organisational consultant bringing critical theory, psychoanalytic and networked perspectives to his work in organisations. Simon has coached senior leaders and consulted strategically to diverse organisations internationally, and has drawn on these insights to inform his research and writing. Simon is the author of *Leadership: A critical text*, now in its third edition (Sage, 2013), and *Coaching and mentoring: A critical text* (Sage, 2012). He is CEO of Analytic-Network Coaching Ltd, a thriving business that trains coaches internationally to '*coach leaders to act in good faith to create the good society*'. Simon is a Past-President of ISPSO and holds honorary professorships at University College Dublin and Moscow School of Economics, and previously was Director of Coaching at Lancaster University Management School and Directed the MA in Consulting and Leadership at the Tavistock Clinic.