

The stability of walls, and leaders “getting away with it”

This paper suggests that something big was going on in the unconscious process of Europe across the violence of the Great War, the Russian Revolution and the Second World War which found a way to stabilise itself in the binary split of East and West across the Iron Curtain and, in particular, the Berlin Wall. “Islamic terrorism” can be seen as a large piece of projective identification in which the West has tried to create the stable enemy it needs.

There were signs of “post-truth” even before the fall of Communism, as though that binary was already breaking down. This has become acute as the West grapples with the shift of power towards China and India, climate change and new technology. It’s as if, in “post-truth”, we are struggling to find a way to talk about these things, which only makes sense if something is foreclosed: what emerges instead is fake news and populism (including Trump and Brexit). The paper will explore the extent to which we are dealing not just with something split off onto the ‘other’, but with a walling off in which there is a foreclosure of the ‘other’. It will do this by considering ways of reading how leadership is being taken up.

One reading is in terms of Earl Hopper’s fourth basic assumption of incohesion. One strand of this makes sense as a groping-after a sort-of feudal approach where insufficiency is handled by seeking to get close to figures who seem to have more. This offers a way to think about people idealising rich leaders such as Boris Johnson and Jacob Rees Mogg who offer them Brexit while ignoring the evidence that they themselves will lose out. Bion suggested that basic assumption pairing is associated with the aristocracy, but another strand is that with these leaders, while their sexual potency is attested to, their female partners are almost invisible, which sounds like a distortion of an Oedipal triangle where the woman is eliminated or abused.

Another reading is in terms of the masculine side of Lacan’s sexuation formula, where he argues that saying that all are subject to symbolic castration (limitation in the ability to say everything) implies the concept of one who isn’t. That works if it is a distant figure — perhaps God or The King — who people only hear of via intermediaries (priests or officials). When people encounter that figure via television or social media, there is a fantasy of knowing the “uncastrated one”, giving the fantasy of escaping castration, either by a fantasy of being like the uncastrated one or being in relation to them. As the acceptance of castration is part of the installation of the lack which gives rise to the symbolic order, this ends up as an attack on language, which makes sense of some of the incoherence of Johnson and Trump. It’s striking that Prince Andrew, as representing aristocracy, was pushed out of his role in the royal family in reaction to questionable sexual behaviour, while at the same time Trump and Johnson escape allegations of sexual misconduct. The suggestion is that Trump and Johnson are offering their followers the fantasy that they too can escape the rules that are felt to limit their potency, unlike Prince Andrew.

The paper will explore the conclusion that, in having lost the seeming stability of the foreclosure offered by the wall between East and West, we are struggling to make sense of a world where the familiar fantasies no longer work and new ones must be found.

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Biographical note

Mark Argent is an organisational consultant who is involved in the interfaces between psychoanalysis, politics and religion. He's stood for the Liberal Democrats in the last three UK General Elections and writing on the process of global change of which the 2016 votes for Brexit and for Trump could be seen as symptoms. He's done extensive in-depth one-to-one and group work in retreat centres and work around where religion meets politics - a psychoanalytic lens on that offers an additional way to think about collective processes across and between cultures, which is a context where some of Lacan's late thinking is particularly rich.