

HAL FOSTER

When I hear the word *Trump*, I reach for my . . . critical glossary? That is pathetic—as if the right term could be a silver bullet. And yet, like so many others, I have struggled to find language for our predicament. The problem is, the old concepts seem inadequate in the face of Trumpism, voided not only by the sheer scale of the calamity but also by its weird mix of the buffoonish and the lethal. If farce comes after tragedy, what comes after farce?

Maybe, though, in order to approach the predicament, we have to pump up the old concepts, raise them to a higher degree. For example, Alexander Kluge sees our networked world as a “third nature” that supersedes the “second nature” of the industrial world described by Georg Lukács a century ago. Perhaps we now need to think about the “fifth estate” of social media in a related way, as a force that trumps the “fourth estate” of journalistic media and thereby evacuates the last residues of the public sphere that, over fifty years ago, Jürgen Habermas associated with the advent of print culture. What kinds of interventions might artists and critics make in the fifth estate?

This past semester I led a seminar on art and politics between the world wars, and at every turn we encountered parallels with the present, such as the violence advocated by Georges Sorel as a way to galvanize a political movement or the decisionism articulated by Carl Schmitt as the very definition of emergency power. Two others, less obvious, also struck me. In his 1927 essay on photography, Siegfried Kracauer made this famous remark about the new visual culture of Weimar society: “Never before has an age been so *informed* about itself. . . . [And] never before has a period *known* so little about itself.” This paradox of information that undermines knowledge also has to be keyed up to match the effects of our media environment, which overwhelms us with data even as it deskills us in interpretation, connects us even as it untethers us.<sup>1</sup> The other term that resonated for me, also to do with Weimar, comes from the 1983 tome

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1. The historians of science Robert Proctor and Jimena Canales have argued that *agnology*, or how it is we do not know—that is, how we are prevented from knowing—is now a necessary complement to epistemology.

*Critique of Cynical Reason* by Peter Sloterdijk (written before he became a darling of the German Right). For Sloterdijk, cynical reason has the structure of fetishistic disavowal: “I know *X* is not true, but I will believe it, indeed act on it, nonetheless.” He offered the notion as a way to account for the blind eye turned to Nazism as it emerged. If we are to comprehend the Trumpist mentality, we need to raise this notion to a higher power, too, for cynical reason today doesn’t care to know, or if it knows, it doesn’t care. (Noncynical unreason, anyone?) Such is one aspect of the “post-truth” condition.<sup>2</sup>

“The primal father” is a concept that can’t be pumped up, so outrageous is it to begin with. You remember that, in *Totem and Taboo* (1913), Freud derives the figure from “the primal horde” in Darwin, a great band of brothers ruled by an all-powerful patriarch. This awful father enjoys all the women in the horde (that is the only role women have in this wacky tale) and leaves the brothers out sexually, to the point where they rise up, kill, and devour the tyrant. Yet this act plunges them into deep guilt, and so they elevate the dead father again, now as a god, or at least a totem around which taboos are established (the taboos against murder and incest above all). Thus, for Freud, does society begin.

There is a way to read this fable of prehistory historically, as a gloss on the bourgeois revolutions that overthrew the kings, that is, as an allegory of democracy, “the transformation of the paternal horde,” as Freud puts it, “into a community of brothers.” He brings back the primal father several years later in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921), and if *Totem and Taboo* reflects indirectly on democracy, *Group Psychology* does the same with Fascism—that is, with the return, long after the democratic decapitation of the king, of the dictatorial egocrat. Indeed, for Freud the mass politics of the time induce a regression to “the group psychology of the horde”: “What is thus awakened,” he writes, “is the idea of a paramount and dangerous personality toward whom only a passive-masochistic attitude is possible.” “The leader of the group,” Freud concludes, “is still the dreaded primal father; the group still wishes to be governed by unrestricted force; it has an extreme passion for authority.”<sup>3</sup>

Why recall the primal father in relation to Trump? Of course, it is hazardous to psychologize anyone, let alone millions of voters, to totalize them in this way, but there is a psychic dimension to his support that we have to probe. No doubt many of his voters—and remember that he received 63 percent of the white-male vote—are sexist and racist, whether secretly or not; certainly, most

2. As Corey Lewandowski likes to say, we take Trump literally but not seriously, while his supporters take him seriously but not literally.

3. In 1936, Bataille wrote a short text titled “Toward a Real Revolution,” in which he writes: “Under autocracy, it is authority which grows intolerable. In democracy, it is the absence of authority” (*October* 36 [Spring 1986], p. 35).

were angry at elites too. But they were also—they were primarily—*excited* by Trump, excited to vote for him: There was positive passion here, not just negative resentment. It may be difficult for people like us to see why, but one way is to suggest that he tapped into the “erotic tie” that binds the horde to the primal father. For this figure both embodies the law (he lords it over the brothers) and performs its transgression (he can grope any woman).<sup>4</sup> A potent double identification opens up: The brothers submit to the father as authority and envy him as outlaw. And so we have a celebrity president (“When you’re a star . . . you can do anything”) as throwback primal father (or maybe just bully-in-chief), and there are legions of white guys who want to be his “apprentices.”

4. For me, there was a strange doubling here with Bill Clinton, as was underscored by the obscene empanelling of the victims of both men during the first presidential debate. But Bill does not quite qualify as a primal father: He is not rich enough (not enough luxury kitsch), and he is vulgar in the wrong way (white trash). Of course, my little analysis leaves out a huge piece of the electoral puzzle—why it is that a majority of white women also voted for Trump. But then they may also be subject to the “erotic tie” (or, rather, subjected to it).



*Rachel Harrison. More News: A Situation. 2016.  
Installation view at Greene Naftali, New York, April 2016.  
Courtesy of the artist and Greene Naftali, New York.  
Photograph by Jason Mandella.*