

Podcast #48—Trump and the Psychology of Grievance

Grievance: *a real or imagined wrong or other cause for complaint or protest, especially unfair treatment*

Liberals and most of the mainstream media were shocked at the election of Donald Trump in 2016. Almost immediately, analyses of the Trump base began to appear, the most prominent theories usually involving matters of race and class. Missing, in my opinion, is a deeper and more empathic dive into the psychology of Trump voters, one that focuses on the psychodynamics of feelings of grievance. At its heart, the experience of grievance involves feelings of betrayal, powerlessness, envy, and rage. In order to understand what happened in 2016 and what might happen again in 2020, one has to understand what really happens when someone feels aggrieved.

Liberals, of course, were quick to identify race as a crucial motivation in Trump voters, reflecting the normalization of racist dog-whistle animus toward Barack Obama and the

racialized fears of immigrants found in Trump's almost exclusively white base.

Class was also deemed a prime ingredient in the toxic stew that was thought to be brewing in Trump voters. These analyses focused on the economic struggles of the non-college educated white working-class voter who turned out in droves for Trump. It has rightly been argued that these workers have been left behind by some combination of automation, corporate offshoring, the weakening of unions, and various forms of corporate malfeasance, resulting in stagnant wages, economic insecurity, and a widening income and wealth gap. This erosion of living standards led to growing frustrations and resentments which Donald Trump tapped into with his campaign to drain the swamp, curb the greed of the wealthy (yes, he did promise that), and launch a war against a scapegoated liberal media.

Finally, the psychology of Trump voters has certainly been discussed in relation to the resentment that many of these voters felt toward what they saw as the patronizing elitism of the bi-coastal elites, liberal academics, and mainstream media, a

class and cultural snobbery captured best, perhaps, by Hillary Clinton's description of them as a "basket of deplorables."

All of these factors seem valid and are likely operative in much of the Trump base. But there is another dimension of their sensibility that Trump, himself, mirrors—and that is a deep sense of grievance, of feeling left out and left behind, of being misunderstood and dismissed, of being betrayed and abandoned. Now, this sentiment is commonplace in everyday life, and I certainly see it often in my own clinical work.

The grievance mind-set in Trump and his supporters was captured in some recent conversations I've had with a few of his voters. These sentiments were expressed in various ways. Sometimes they emerged as simple expressions of victimization, some form of, "They treat me like shit," or "They don't give a damn about me." The "they" here refers usually to their employers or some arm of government.

More corrosive still were feelings that Dave, a plumber and Trump supporter, expressed to me when he said, "I work hard and don't get rewarded for it. I was taught that hard work and responsibility made for a good life. It hasn't felt that way. I

feel ripped off.” These sentiments reveal the surfacing of Dave’s sense of betrayal. The world was not keeping its part of some bargain. Even more bitter was Charles, who worked as a clerical supervisor in the back office of a law firm, who said, “I work hard and get screwed but there are people who work and sacrifice half as much as me who get a free ride!” He went on to explain that when taxes and his share of his benefits are deducted from his pay, he can just about make ends meet, but that if he went on unemployment and got Medicaid, he’d be almost as well off as he is now. Whether true or not, this envy-tinged belief was heartfelt and seemed to account for Charles’s anger at immigrants, the indigent, and people of color, whom he perceived as getting away with something.

I believe that the central ingredients of the psychology of grievance are feelings of betrayal and envy which trigger rage and a desire for revenge. Taken together, a toxic brew.

Think for a moment about the experience of betrayal. When someone betrays you, the feelings that result are complicated. A good analogy might be the experience of marital infidelity and betrayal. The betrayed spouse feels as if his or her reality—past,

present, and future—has been challenged, contradicted, and negated by the cheating spouse. The victim feels as if the world as he or she knows it is suddenly revealed to be a lie. Anyone who has been through this knows what I ‘m talking about it. The blow to one’s sense of reality is incalculably painful, the palpable feeling of rejection and abandonment vibrating in the core of one’s being, and always involves an experience of helplessness. Someone has tracked mud on your carpet and you can’t undo it, can’t turn back the clock. A better analogy might be that you have been shot. Even if you survive, trauma lives on, the scar is there, and will always be there. You’re living with the stain, with the injury. There’s nothing you can do about it.

The feelings of helplessness are infected with humiliation and shame. Betrayed people feel like there must have been something that they did to account for the betrayal. They feel one-down, inferior. Something must be wrong with *them*. Thus, their helplessness is shot through with shame.

What is the natural human response to helplessness and humiliation? It’s usually depression, and then anger. You get sad or you get mad—or both. The ‘sad’ is when you internalize

the betrayal as your lot in life. The unconscious purpose of anger is to fight back against feelings of helplessness and humiliation.

Trump supporters feel betrayed in just these ways. They feel that the “system” has abandoned them, that their dreams of upward mobility and success have been ruined. They look around for someone to blame. Often, they blame themselves. Equally often, they blame others—government, liberals, and, especially, people of color, including immigrants.

Not only do white working class people feel betrayed, but they also feel envious, envious of people who they think are cutting in line, the undeserving poor, the immigrant who they see being given social benefits without having to earn them, people who appear to be illegitimately rewarded in some way. Envy invariably makes a person angry. Envy makes one want to take away or spoil the thing that is envied. It makes one want to cut benefits, restrict immigration, and impose law and order on “them.”

Many Trump supporters experience these elements of grievance. They feel betrayed, abandoned, and envious. They

are demoralized and angry. They feel left out and left behind. They believe, falsely in my view, that others are getting something for nothing. They feel that their hard work has not been rewarded but, instead, has been taken for granted and even devalued.

It's important that we look closely at this experience with a spirit of empathy and with a genuine attempt to understand it. The best examples of this approach can be found in Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb's classic book, *The Hidden Injuries of Class* and Arlie Hochschild's more recent study of the Tea Party called *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*. Sennett and Cobb saw white working-class anger, the anger mobilized by Ronald Reagan, with his racist dog whistles about "welfare queens," as stemming from the ethos of sacrifice. By that they were referring to the ways that working class people redeem their sacrifice, the hardships of their everyday lives, with the belief that their children will have better lives than they do, which makes their struggles seem worthwhile. But Sennett and Cobb go on to point out that this is a belief that is undermined by the

perceptions that there are other people who enjoy the American Dream without sacrifice—thus making credible the fantasy of the Welfare Queen who thrives without any sacrifice at all.

Sociologist Arlie Hochschild spent a great deal of time speaking with white working-class men and women from Louisiana who sympathized with the extremely conservative Tea Party ideology. She captured their underlying sensibility using the metaphor of a long line. She pictured them standing in a line that stretched up and over a hill. This line is leading to the American Dream. But the line isn't moving (economic stagnation). Meanwhile, they see up ahead people of color, gays, women, cutting in line (via Affirmative Action and liberal social safety net programs) cutting in line. They feel abandoned, mistreated. They are filled with an underlying sense of grievance.

When someone feels aggrieved, suffering makes them feel entitled to compensation, to some type of indemnity, and ultimately to revenge. When Donald Trump held himself up as someone who would drain the swamp, someone with contempt for the bi-coastal elites, including the media, as someone who

would stand up for American workers against foreign competition, and as someone who would keep white America safe from brown immigrants, he was offering a balm to aggrieved Americans. Trump's constant complaints about unfair trade deals positioned himself, but also America itself, as every bit entitled and aggrieved as his constituency. This vision of Americans as victims appealed to people who felt this same way in their everyday lives.

Of course, there isn't a one size fits all explanation for the motivation of Trump voters. But I think that explanations that are primarily based on economics and race are incomplete and do a disservice to the complicated ways that Trump voters suffer, a suffering which we should try to understand with compassion and curiosity. In my view, the psychology of grievance does just that.