

# RUPTURES IN THE AMERICAN PSYCHE

Containing Destructive Populism  
in Perilous Times

*Michael J. Diamond*



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*For Linda, for Maya and Mitchell and Baby Emilia, for Alex and Kate,  
and for all who cherish justice, the preciousness of democracy, and our  
treasured planet*

*In a dark time, the eye begins to see,  
I meet my shadow in the deepening shade.*

—Theodore Roethke (1960, p. 231)

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## About the author

**Michael J. Diamond**, PhD, FIPA, is a training and supervising analyst at the Los Angeles Institute and Society for Psychoanalytic Studies. He is a fellow of the International Psychoanalytical Association, the American Psychological Association, and the American Academy of Clinical Psychology. He has published more than 100 journal articles and book chapters as well as four books across wide-ranging topics, including psychoanalytic technique and analytic mindedness; trauma and dissociation; masculinity, femininity, and gender theory; fathering and the paternal function; hypnosis and altered states; and group processes and social action. He is well known for national and international presentations and is the honored recipient of numerous awards for his teaching, writing, and clinical contributions. His four previous books are: *Masculinity and Its Discontents: The Male Psyche and the Inherent Tensions of Maturing Manhood* (Routledge, 2021), *The Second Century of Psychoanalysis: Evolving Perspectives on Therapeutic Action* (Karnac, 2011), *My Father Before Me: How Fathers and Sons Influence Each Other Throughout Their Lives* (W. W. Norton, 2007), and *Becoming a Father: Contemporary Social, Developmental, and Clinical Perspectives* (Springer, 1995).

Several of his publications have been translated into other languages, including German, Portuguese, Korean, Arabic, Mandarin, and French. He has a full-time clinical practice in Los Angeles, California, where he is also active in teaching, supervising, and writing.

## Preface

Writing is often a means of reducing the anxiety one experiences in grappling with an especially troubling problem. The process itself frequently helps me as a psychoanalyst to acquire a deeper, more complex rendering of the phenomenon and especially of the subjectivities—including my own—that I seek to better understand. This book represents the culmination of more than six years of study, augmented by a lifetime of personal experience. Still, much like both the psychoanalytic journey into (and with) an individual psyche and the American experiment itself, the book is far from a finished product. This is how it is with each patient and his or her psychic development. An individual psyche or a group psyche always remains *in process*, and its stability, coherence, and progress are forever precarious.

My interest in delving deeper into the polity of the United States and the populist movement that led to Donald Trump's rise to power is aptly illustrated by fragments from three clinically relevant instances that personally impacted me following Trump's effort to secure the Republican nomination for president. The reader may find familiar elements in these brief vignettes.

### **Vignette 1: A child reacts**

A child psychoanalyst met with the parents of a six-year-old boy who had been sent home from school after “beating up” another child. The couple’s son was a cute and chubby, blond-haired boy who had never before been in trouble or been particularly aggressive. However, the boy had become enraged with another boy, whom he then punched in the face twice, after the other boy said to him, “You look like Trump!”

### **Vignette 2: A patient with a secret**

Leo, a highly successful professional in his late fifties, had met with me once weekly for nearly four years. Though he had a long and seemingly happy marriage, was a devoted father to his teenage children and a highly respected member of his religious Jewish community, he had long suffered from a deep sense of shame as an immigrant who had fled from an oppressive, authoritarian regime. Despite his accomplishments, he experienced himself as an outsider, most poignantly within his own family. With considerable guilt, he carried on a “secret life” (involving both financial assets and clandestine extramarital affairs) that he was able to share with me.

However, it wasn’t until well into our third year of work (more than two years after Trump was elected) that Leo sheepishly told me something he hadn’t “dared to disclose, especially to my wife and children”—or to his best friend or anyone else in his inner circle. I was taken by surprise when this socially liberal, highly educated, and thoughtful man revealed that he had “voted for Trump, donated substantially to his campaign, and unequivocally supported him” (despite Trump’s defense of white-nationalist, anti-Semitic protesters at the 2017 Charlottesville rally). Leo was terrified that if his wife or children were to learn of this, they would “never forgive me—and maybe even never love me again.” Not surprisingly, he was also very fearful that my understanding of him and of his dynamics and character would vanish.

### **Vignette 3: A dream of my own**

A close friend, a Jungian analyst, recently reminded me of a dream I had shared with him a few months after Trump took office in 2017.

Interestingly, I had totally forgotten the dream. In the dream, I was seated in my home office excitedly waiting for a new patient to arrive. When the patient entered, I was somewhat shocked to see that it was Trump himself, particularly since I didn't think he'd be inclined to enter into analysis. But he did—sort of! In fact, it seemed that he was baiting me, daring me to figure out what was going on with him, but each of my attempts at understanding was met with stronger opposition as he boasted that he knew so much more than I did, and that I was wasting his time and money. I felt useless and bullied, as well as increasingly helpless.

The dream took on a nightmarish quality, and I woke up startled and befuddled as to its meaning. Only now, several years later, does it seem that the dream may have had something to do with this book—a future project I hadn't at all been conscious of at the time. In one sense, at least in part, this book reflects my own “psychoanalysis” of America's relationship to Trump and Trumpism. Most interestingly, as I will briefly discuss in my final chapter, I had a second, more benign dream four and a half years after the first one, in which Trump once again appeared in my office.

\* \* \*

Despite Trump's central role in each of these vignettes, this book is not about him or his character, even though many psychoanalysts and other mental health clinicians could have a field day (and many have, clearly and skillfully) in speculating about, inferring from, and diagnosing this exceedingly flawed yet astonishingly skillful, persuasive human being. Who Trump is and how he persuades others to follow his lead continues to play a truly momentous role in what is happening in the US and, to some extent, worldwide. As this book will make clear, a perfect storm has made for a most dangerous fit, resulting in the populist cult of Trumpism.

Before inviting readers to join in the quest to understand and help contain what I believe to be a democratic society in peril, I wish to share a couple of personal notes. I've been writing this book as we live through an unprecedented time of global pandemic caused by the COVID-19 virus, resulting in political, economic, health care, and environmental instability. In addition, the climate crisis is mounting and wildfires

flourish along the Pacific Coast of North America and elsewhere in the world; at the same time, societal inequities and social injustices render this a time of unprecedented national and international turbulence.

Though helpful in providing a modicum of solace through greater understanding and potentially hopeful activism, the process of researching, thinking, and writing this book has not provided me with a respite from my deep concerns. Still, seeing what's in plain sight, this arduous labor of love is being carried out for all those who cherish justice, the preciousness of democracy, and the treasure of our planet—and perhaps especially for those who will be born years after we who are alive today have passed on.

Throughout this endeavor, my many conversations with trusted friends and respected colleagues that involve shared understandings, divergences, and convergences in thinking and feeling—as well as anxious concerns—have proven invaluable. Here, then, as I stand on the shoulders of this groundswell of interactive support, I offer this book as provocative food for thought and, hopefully, impetus for action among those interested in learning more about what lies behind the power and influence of America's "Very Stable Genius."

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