The Othering of Donald Trump and His Supporters

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The 2016 presidential election was extraordinary in many respects. One was the way in which the Republican candidate and his supporters were disparaged in the establishment press. Although it is a truism that politics can often be rough (as in the sayings, "It ain’t beanbag" and "It’s a contact sport") and any apparent civility in the rhetoric is often just a mask in front of bare-knuckle tactics, many observers have noted that the 2016 election became especially rough.

Further, the attacks on candidate Donald Trump and his supporters came not only from political opponents—which would be expected—but also from those who identify themselves as conservatives, Republicans, or both. Under ordinary circumstances they would be expected to either be supportive of the party’s candidate (whether enthusiastically or half-heartedly), or be mostly silent about their distaste for the candidate. That was not the case in this election; some of Trump’s fiercest critics, both in the primary and in the general election campaign, were individuals and organizations one would expect to be at least nominally on his side.

In this chapter, I examine some instances of attacks on Trump and his supporters which go beyond the customary rough-and-tumble of American politics. These examples were chosen both from the campaign and also from the first eight months of the Trump administration. Through this analysis I identify particular features that indicate the attacks involve an “othering” process. First it is necessary to establish a working definition of “other” and “othering,” as the application of the term has evolved considerably since its coinage in the philosophical dichotomy of self/other.
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THE “OTHER” AND “OTHERING”

Both the noun and the verb are commonly used today inside and outside of university settings. Although speech having the effect of dividing people into opposing groups goes back as far as recorded history, the term “Other” originated in theoretical exploration of the nature of self-awareness. Lately it has become a staple in social theory and critique. Along the way, in this migration from philosophy to sociology, the meaning (both denotation and connotation) seems to have shifted dramatically.

The Other is a key concept in phenomenology, explaining a human being’s capacity to be aware both of oneself and of other human beings. A number of different schools of phenomenology emerged in the nineteenth and twentieth century, but the project remained one of developing a theoretical understanding of human consciousness. In simple terms, one knows oneself in relation to other selves; in that way, the Self and the Other are necessary ingredients to understanding experience. The appeal of the self/other dichotomy was that it refuted the possibility that the world (i.e., lived experience) existed only inside one’s head (solipsism) without being forced into the position that only one world could possibly exist (positivism). Put concisely, “[t]he Other appears as a psychological phenomenon in the course of a person’s life, and not as a radical threat to the existence of the Self.” In that context, the connotation is neutral; there is no moral wrong implied.

That application of the term, however useful it may be to understanding an individual’s life world, does not readily scale upward to an understanding of social system features. As emphasis shifted in the twentieth century from philosophical exploration of consciousness and knowledge to sociological identification and critique of such issues as colonialism/imperialism, power, social class, gender relations, stereotyping, and inequality, the self/other dichotomy morphed into a negative denotation (dominator/dominated, “us versus them”) carrying a negative connotation (doing so is a morally wrong act), and now is frequently invoked in a prescriptive context (one ought not do it or it is socially unjust). It seems clear this is the contemporary usage of the term other, as a few examples will illustrate.

It is not unusual today for credentialed academicians to place some of their work on personal web pages. A quote from a site called the Other Sociologist will provide an illustration of the self/other dichotomy in its contemporary usage as a conceptual tool for social critique:

The idea of “otherness” is central to sociological analyses of how majority and minority identities are constructed. This is because the representation of different groups within any given society is controlled by groups that have greater political power. In order to understand the notion of The Other [capitals in original], sociologists first seek to put a critical spotlight on the ways in which social identities are constructed. . . .
Social identities reflect the way individuals and groups internalize established social categories within their societies, such as their cultural (or ethnic) identities, gender identities, class identities, and so on. These social categories shape our ideas about who we think we are, how we want to be seen by others, and the groups to which we belong. The author makes explicit that she sees the value of the concept to primarily be its utility in activism intended to alter the existing social order: “The notion of otherness is used by sociologists to highlight how social identities are contested. We also use this concept to break down the ideologies and resources that groups use to maintain their social identities.”

Another example comes from a relatively new journal called Othering and Belonging: Expanding the Circle of Human Concern, associated with the Haas Institute for a Fair and Inclusive Society at UC Berkeley. An article in its inaugural issue declared that “The problem of the twenty-first century is the problem of ‘othering.’” An indicator of the activist bent of this work is evident in the authors’ definition of the verb form:

We define “othering” as a set of dynamics, processes, and structures that engender marginality and persistent inequality across any of the full range of human differences based on group identities. While not entirely universal, the core mechanisms [that] engender marginality are largely similar across contexts. Dimensions of othering include, but are not limited to, religion, sex, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status (class), disability, sexual orientation, and skin tone.

Along the line of noticing how much the concept has changed over time, it is interesting that their definition centers not on the characteristics of a thing itself (social object, speech act, institutional feature, etc.), but on the social effects the thing is considered to produce.

Usage of the term has extended beyond the academic world. A personal web page defines it in this way:

By “othering,” we mean any action by which an individual or group becomes mentally classified in somebody’s mind as “not one of us.” Rather than always remembering that every person is a complex bundle of emotions, ideas, motivations, reflexes, priorities, and many other subtle aspects, it’s sometimes easier to dismiss them as being in some way less human, and less worthy of respect and dignity than we are.

The author describes his purpose:

The concept behind this site, then, is that a) humans have an undeniable and insidious inclination to engage in “othering” through patterns for the purpose of self-preservation, and b) learning to avoid and counteract these thought patterns is integral to greatly reducing the world’s hatred and suffering. Our
intent is to raise people's consciousness about othering behavior, to make them more alert to these thought patterns, and to encourage alternative ways of addressing the problems that we often seek to avoid by dehumanizing any one group.\(^9\)

It is noteworthy that the name of the site reflects the shift in meaning over time: There Are No Others. In the original sense of the term, the title is nonsensical, in that one cannot know oneself exists without knowing others.

For the purpose of this chapter, the challenge lies in the discriminant validity of the terms, *other* and *othering*. Of the huge amount of rhetoric in the political-arena, both in the campaign and during the presidential administration, presumably some might constitute othering while the rest would not. Distinguishing one's candidacy, one's favored candidate, or one's identity group from different ones is othering in its initial meaning. Essentially, one differentiates one's position or preference from the alternatives, and—hopefully—provides a rationale for the preference. Accordingly, persuasive appeals can be couched in such terms. In my view, this is both legitimate and constructive in political discourse.

But attacks on the alternatives which demonize them or render them subaltern to the audience (in the sense of being inferior, not worthy of full social participation)\(^10\) seem to me to be othering in the contemporary sense of being wrongful speech acts. As is usually the case, I am doubtful that a conceptual bright line can be drawn between the two. Nonetheless, the examples that follow strike me as fairly clear instances of Trump, his supporters, or both being othered (in the contemporary usage) during the 2016 election and the early period of the administration.

**THE CAMPAIGN**

It is to be expected that the major parties' presidential candidates will campaign vigorously for the office, and that the rhetoric they employ will include attacks on their opponents. Typically, such attacks focus on policy initiatives, empathy (specifically, lack of empathy) for various cohorts of citizens, temperament, or character traits. And, indeed, much of the 2016 campaign ran true to that expectation, on the part of candidates, their representatives and surrogates, and commentators.

What was non-routine was rhetoric so harsh as to dismiss the humanity of a candidate and supporters, and to suggest they were illegitimate participants in a democratic political process.

Even though her campaign quickly tried to walk it back, the comments of the Democrat candidate, Hillary Clinton, at a Manhattan fund-raiser on September 9, 2016, provide a clear example. In the transcript published by the *Los Angeles Times* most of Clinton's remarks are in keeping with traditional
fund-raising pep talks to supporters: identifying harms her opponent’s policies might create, invoking appeals to particular interest groups (in this case, LGBT), and raising doubts about her opponent’s ability to handle the office of the president. This material drew no particular attention, nor did her request that audience members work phone banks and “if you know anybody who’s even thinking about voting for Trump, stage an intervention.”

Embedded in this speech was the passage that rightly became controversial, in that it impugned the character of Trump supporters and pointedly excluded them from full political citizenship. Oddly, Clinton’s remarks took this abrupt turn after an anodyne exhortation to her audience to not become “complacent” with the polling indicating she would win the election:

We are living in a volatile political environment. You know, to just be grossly generalistic [sic; she presumably meant “to overgeneralize”], you could put half of Trump’s supporters into what I call the basket of deplorables. Right? The racist, exist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamophobic—you name it. And unfortunately there are people like that. And he has lifted them up. He has given voice to their websites that used to only have 11,000 people—now 11 million. He tweets and retweets their offensive[,] hateful[,] mean-spirited rhetoric. Now some of those folks—they are irredeemable, but thankfully they are not America.

Having first accused a large portion of her opponent’s supporters of moral failings—the “-isms” she listed—Clinton condemned them (“irredeemable”) and excluded them (“not America”). In short, she othered them, to an audience of her supporters. She then proceeded to introduce Barbra Streisand as featured guest artist of the event, who performed a parody version of her hit “Send in the Clowns” with lyrics rewritten to identify Trump as the clown. The audience’s reaction indicates it was well-received.

The “basket of deplorables” comment was immediately seen as a gaffe, with the Trump campaign denouncing the insult and Clinton trying to walk back her disparaging reference to a large portion of his supporters and refocus the attack on the candidate, himself. In the original statement, “deplorable” was a noun, referring to Trump supporters; in the walk-back, it was an adjective referring to a Trump campaign strategy: “It is deplorable that Trump has built his campaign largely on prejudice and paranoia and given a national platform to hateful views and voices, including by retweeting fringe bigots with a few dozen followers and spreading their message to 11 million people.” It seems unlikely, however, that her comments at the fund-raiser were either intended for only a private audience or an off-the-cuff improvisation. Los Angeles Times reporting on the controversy states that the event was open to the press (hence the ready availability of a transcript and video), and that Clinton had used the word “deplorable” to describe at least some indefinite proportion of Trump’s supporters before.
Another surprising turn in the 2016 campaign was that two flagship conservative publications, the *National Review* and the *Weekly Standard*, maintained a #NeverTrump stance all the way to Election Day. It is customary for them to express preferences for a particular primary contestant and describe their objections to the others; after the primary concludes and the Republican Party has chosen its candidate, however, the publications do not actively undermine a candidate they previously disfavored. A few examples will illustrate how this election did not follow the template.

The editors of the *National Review* made no secret of their distaste for Donald Trump during the primary campaign. In their special “Against Trump” edition, a collection of essays opposing him as the potential party candidate, the editorial contained this particularly stinging characterization in its first paragraph:

> Donald Trump leads the polls nationally and in most states in the race for the Republican presidential nomination. There are understandable reasons for his eminence, and he has shown impressive gut-level skill as a campaigner. But he is not deserving of conservative support in the caucuses and primaries. Trump is a philosophically unmoored political opportunist who would trash the broad conservative ideological consensus within the GOP in favor of a free-floating populism with strong-man overtones.\(^{16}\)

It is noteworthy that the magazine chose to devote an entire edition to opposing a single primary candidate; typically it would run articles analyzing the contestants for the nomination and eventually endorse one as the campaign wore on. The language choice in the above passage is also atypical: describing a candidate as “unmoored” and an “opportunist” pushes the outer limit of the refined tone of most writing in the magazine.

As a personal comment on this passage, I would express my doubt about there being a “broad conservative ideological consensus” within the Republican Party, which candidate Trump was likely to “trash.” What comes to mind are periodic complaints about certain Republicans being “Republicans in Name Only” (a/k/a RINOs), and periodic primary challenges to incumbent Republicans; in any case, that the acronym has been commonplace in conservative political writing for a number of years is decent evidence that such intraparty consensus is a fantasy. In addition, it is not uncommon for Congressional Republicans to have difficulty in whip checks on controversial votes; this would not be the case if any broad ideological consensus did, in fact, exist and was accessible at crunch time on a difficult vote.

The *National Review* followed this with another issue, the cover of which displayed a caustic caricature of Trump with Chris Christie kissing his ring, and titled “The Clown Prince.”\(^{17}\) The theme had already appeared in an earlier issue, with roving editor Kevin D. Williamson contributing a piece titled, “Fifteen Elephants and a Clown”\(^{18}\) (apparently a reference to the large
initial field of Republican primary candidates), with the subtitle “The Donald’s life has been seven decades of buffoonery” and closing with the comment, “He might have had any sort of life he chose, and Trump chose a clown’s life.”

Williamson did not confine his long-running diatribe to Trump himself. In the “Clown Prince” issue he had harsh words for an electoral cohort pundits were describing (and continued to describe) as Trump’s base of enthusiastic supporters—white, working class voters who felt ignored in the political process. He pulled no punches, first asserting “In the story of the white working class’s descent into dysfunction, they are the victims and villains both,” following that with a reference to “the welfare dependency, the drug and alcohol addiction, the family anarchy—which is to say, the whelping of human children with all the respect and wisdom of a stray dog,” and later closing the essay with a stinging summation:

The truth about these dysfunctional, downscale communities is that they deserve to die. Economically, they are negative assets. Morally, they are indefensible. . . . The white American underclass is in thrall to a vicious, selfish culture whose main products are misery and used heroin needles. Donald Trump’s speeches make them feel good. So does OxyContin. What they need isn’t analgesics, literal or political.

A Washington Post reporter interviewed National Review’s editor, Rich Lowry, about the magazine’s decision to publish the Against Trump issue. Among other tidbits about the issue—including the disagreements among the editors and guest writers about their preferred candidate, and the anticipation they would be dropped from sponsoring one of the remaining Republican primary debates if they proceeded with plans to publish the Against Trump issue—Lowry responded to a question about why they decided to do it: “The most important thing is putting a marker down and saying, ‘He’s not one of us. He’s not a conservative, and he’s not what conservatism is.’” Lowry did not use the actual word, but it seems fair to interpret this comment as an othering gesture.

Further examples of conservative pundits harshly denouncing Trump are plentiful. In a television appearance during the primary debate stage of the campaign Peter Wehner essentially described Trump as a demagogue:

[Trump] is the most massively ignorant person ever to run for president and he cannot discuss public policy. So everything he’s done from the day that he’s gone in is to set up these debates that are on the ground of appealing to the darkest impulses of the country. That is what he relishes, and he wants to be in the gutter.
For his part, Bill Kristol, editor of the *Weekly Standard*, was a consistently vocal critic of Trump, becoming an icon of the conservative branch of #NeverTrump through the primary campaign and even the general election campaign. It is striking that on the eve of the presidential election, he published a brief editorial reiterating his position. After summarizing his career-long Republican bona fides, he described Trump as “a repulsive person, with dangerous prejudices, who’s unfit to be President,” and closed the piece with the #NeverTrump hashtag. It seems extraordinary that a self-identified party loyalist would openly wish for his party’s defeat, and would do so in such harsh terms.

THE EARLY MONTHS OF THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION

Traditionally, the general election is followed by a period of comparative quiet—that is, a lessening of the emotional intensity of the stretch of the campaign. Granted, one side will celebrate and express optimism about the future, while the other engages in post hoc analysis of its loss (possibly including some recriminations) and wax pessimistic about the consequences of the democratic choice. Nonetheless, the usual pattern as the next administration is formed, takes office, and begins to govern has long been termed the “honeymoon” period in which overt partisanship is moderated or perhaps more accurately, masked for the time being) and criticism more measured. Quite simply, that was not the pattern in the 2016 election.

On the day after the election, the *New Yorker* ran an editorial attributed to the magazine’s editor, David Remnick. It is remarkable for its relentlessly negative characterization of the election and the winning candidate. It begins with this:

> The election of Donald Trump to the Presidency is nothing less than a tragedy for the American republic, a tragedy for the Constitution, and a triumph for the forces, at home and abroad, of nativism, authoritarianism, misogyny, and racism. Trump’s shocking victory, his ascension to the Presidency, is a sickening event in the history of the United States and liberal democracy.

Remnick returned to this theme later in the piece: “Trump was not elected on a platform of decency, fairness, moderation, and the rule of law; he was elected, in the main, on a platform of resentment. Fascism is not our future—it cannot be; we cannot allow it to be so—but this is surely the way fascism can begin.”

Having raised various moralistic objections to the process (the laundry list of -isms and -ogys, above), Remnick damned Trump, the person, in no uncertain terms, describing him first alliteratively as “a twisted caricature of every rotten reflex of the radical right,” and amplifying the point later in
the piece with an indictment of Trump’s character: “Trump [is] a flim-flam man who cheated his customers, investors, and contractors; a hollow man whose countless statements and behavior reflect a human being of dismal qualities—greedy, mendacious, and bigoted. His level of egotism is rarely exhibited outside of a clinical environment.”

In addition to accusations of character and personality defects, Remnick leveled the accusation that Trump had himself engaged in othering during the campaign. This passage is a good example of how the term is used in contemporary rhetoric, how it is axiomatic that othering is an illegitimate move, and how it is axiomatic that defending an othered group is presumptively a virtuous act:

Trump is vulgarity unbounded, a knowledge-free national leader who will not only set markets tumbling but will strike fear into the hearts of the vulnerable, the weak, and above all, the many varieties of Other whom he has so deeply insulted. The African-American Other. The Hispanic Other. The female Other. The Jewish and Muslim Other.

Remnick foresaw a dismal future, as one would expect; this passage moreover casts substantial doubt on the wisdom, and possibly character, of a large number of citizens: “That the electorate has, in its plurality, decided to live in Trump’s world of vanity, hate, arrogance, untruth, and recklessness, his disdain for democratic norms, is a fact that will lead, inevitably, to all manner of national decline and suffering.”

The idea that the electorate made a bad choice of president was broadened, in a piece in Foreign Policy the next day. The problem was not simply an ill-considered choice; the problem was that the electorate is fundamentally incapable of making a good choice:

OK, so that just happened. Donald Trump always enjoyed massive support from uneducated, low-information white people. . . . Last night we saw something historic: the dance of the dunces. Never have educated voters so uniformly rejected a candidate. But never before have the lesser-educated so uniformly supported a candidate. . . . Trump owes his victory to the uninformed.

The “dance of the dunces” phrase is striking, as a disparagement of Trump’s supporters. It is interesting that while it was not in the title or subtitle of the piece, it is part of its URL.

The author went on to argue that the electorate, in general, lacks enough knowledge to make an intelligent choice of leadership. This led him to speak favorably of alternatives to the current system of voting that “at least [take] seriously that universal suffrage and voter ignorance go hand in hand.” The pox-on-both-your-houses tone is evident in the close of the piece: “Trump’s
victory is the victory of the uninformed. But, to be fair, Clinton’s victory would also have been. Democracy is the rule of the people, but the people are in many ways unfit to rule.”

It is interesting to note that the piece begins as an explanation of Trump’s surprising win (viz., his supporters are sufficiently ignorant of vital information relevant to their vote that they would be supporters), and eventually arrives at the position that since democratic choice, the process itself, suffers from an intractable problem, the only cure is a non-democratic process: “There is no real solution to the problem of political ignorance, unless we are willing to break with democratic politics.”

This position would appear in keeping with the postelection agitation for the Electoral College to nullify the actual electoral vote tally, and with the advocacy for impeaching a president before his administration actually got up and running—both unusual features of this election. It is also striking that it directly contradicts what has long been a cherished theme among intellectuals, that every citizen’s vote be given equal weight and none should be excluded. Presumably the author would not wish the influence of his own vote to be diminished in the decision; an observer might well infer an implicit self/other dichotomy to underlie an essentially elitist position.

In the early days of the new administration a theme emerged that the efforts to implement campaign promises such as scaling back regulation, controlling illegal immigration, and taking tougher foreign policy stances were being undercut or at least sandbagged by career personnel in the respective units of the federal bureaucracy, individuals personally or professionally opposed to such changes. The term “deep state” came to be used as shorthand to denote this sort of organizational inertia. Bill Kristol used this term to express his continued opposition to the Trump presidency: “Obviously strongly prefer normal democratic and constitutional politics. But if it comes to it, prefer the deep state to the Trump state.” It is striking that just as he had hoped his party’s candidate would lose the election, he wished his party’s president would fail at implementing his policy initiatives. One can reasonably read this tweet to be a restatement that Trump was “not one of us.”

The first-hundred-days review of a new administration is a tradition in political reporting, whatever one might think of the logical validity of an essentially arbitrary chronological benchmark. Although some pundits did temper their earlier criticism a bit, others chose to maintain the heat. In an op-ed, Peter Wehner reiterated his position that Trump was unqualified for office: “[T]hese developments paint a portrait of a man who was wholly unprepared to fulfill his primary job requirement—to govern competently and well.” In addition, he threw a jab at Trump’s supporters: “In 2016, many voters saw ignorance not as something to be embarrassed about but as something to be celebrated.” Months later, Wehner still had not softened his stance appreciably:
All of which brings us to Donald Trump, arguably the most disruptive and transgressive president in American history. He thrives on creating turbulence in every conceivable sphere. The blast radius of his tumultuous acts and chaotic temperament is vast. . . .

His disordered personality thrives on mayhem and upheaval, on vicious personal attacks and ceaseless conflict. As we’re seeing, his malignant character is emboldening some. . . .

We have as president the closest thing to a nihilist in our history—a man who believes in little or nothing, who has the impulse to burn down rather than to build up. 39

For his part, neither had David Remnick softened his denunciation of Trump; one might quip that such bipartisan agreement is rare in the pundit class. In his one-hundred-days essay Remnick maintained his negative assessment of Trump’s character: “Impulsive, egocentric, and mendacious, Trump has . . . set fire to the integrity of his office. . . . Trump appears to strut through the world forever studying his own image. He thinks out loud, and is incapable of reflection. He is unserious, unfocussed, and, at times, it seems, unhinged.” 40 Remnick continued his theme that a Trump presidency was a threat to the best aspects of the American political system, because of his character defects:

The Trump Presidency represents a rebellion against liberalism itself—an angry assault on the advances of groups of people who have experienced profound, if fitful, empowerment over the past half century. There is nothing about Trump’s public pronouncements that indicates that he has welcomed these moral advances; his language, his tone, his personal behavior, and his policies all suggest, and foster, a politics of resentment. 41

Some in the pundit class ventured to strike a more conciliatory tone, only to be met with hostility from their audience. Online publication has facilitated direct comments from publishing outlets’ consumers, and thus we can more readily get glimpses into the public mind. Nicholas Kristof made his own preference for progressive politics clear (and likewise made clear that his intent was to equip Democrat candidates to compete more effectively), but nonetheless wished to better understand the thinking of Trump supporters, especially those who might experience a personal cutback in government benefits as a result of the new administration’s adjustments in funding. He seemed genuinely surprised at the reaction to an earlier column, describing the responses from the readers of the New York Times as “a torrent of venom”:

“I absolutely despise these people,” one woman tweeted at me after I interviewed Trump voters. “Truly the worst of humanity. To hell with every one of them.”
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... Another: “ALL [capitals in original] Trump voters are racist and deplorable. They’ll never vote Democratic. We should never pander to the Trumpites. We’re not a party for racists.”

On the *Power Line* blog, Steven Hayward collected additional reader responses to Kristof’s repeated attempt to extend something of an olive branch, including these three:

Just like the Klan and Aryan Nations filth, Republicans must be socially ostracized from coast to coast.

Sorry, Nick. I’ve never met more ignorant and bigoted idiots than these people. Why be nice to them?

No, Nick. You are way off base here. We are at war. A war against ignorance and bigotry.

Clearly, these *New York Times* readers viewed Trump supporters as the Other group to their Self group.

The scorn for Trump supporters was not confined to the *New York Times* readership. *CNN* host Fareed Zakaria spoke of “the toxic energy on the far right” in much the same way in a *New Day* segment promoting his upcoming special show “Why Trump Won.” He got more specific, attributing Trump’s election win to racism, sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia:

And he [Trump] knew that the election of a black president had stirred a kind of racial animus among some people... A real sense of cultural alienation that the older white, non-college educated Americans have is the sense that their country is changing because of immigrants. Because maybe blacks are getting—rising up to a kind of central place in society. Because of, you know, gays being afforded equal rights. Because of, frankly, a lot of working women.

**SOCIAL MEDIA AND POPULAR CULTURE**

One would expect social media channels such as Twitter to foster a good amount of bashing. The limited character space and ease with which visual memes can be inserted inhibits nuanced and thoughtful exchange while facilitating telegraphic barbed comments—hardly a channel characteristic conducive to negotiating or even exchanging divergent views on substantive disagreements, while clearly fostering intemperate exchanges. Examples of othering moves abound all across the political spectrum; it will be useful here to note a few as illustrations of the contempt for Trump and his supporters.

Social media celebrity Reign of April generated a lot of retweets and likes with the comment “Because, for some, the Confederacy isn’t alt-history. It’s right now.” She included an image of the confederate flag with “Donald
Trump for President 2016” on the red field. This tweet was part of her #NoConfederate hashtag campaign against a proposed HBO show, but it is of interest here as an example of visual rhetoric ostracizing Trump supporters. There had been some reporting of the confederate flag occasionally appearing at Trump rallies during the campaign despite Trump’s disavowal of it; April chose to include the image even though it was not directly relevant to the subject of her tweet, the HBO show, and the election was seven months in the past. It seems fair to see the visual juxtaposition of two different things (a battle flag from a civil war a century-and-a-half ago with a campaign slogan from the last election) as intended to suggest they both are the Other.

Media professionals have adopted Twitter as part of their routine, so it is unsurprising to find similar content from them. Referring to a Trump rally held in Huntington, West Virginia, on August 3, 2017, pundit Stuart Rothenberg tweeted the prejudiced remark, “Lots of people in West Virginia can’t support themselves or speak English.” When challenged on that, he maintained his stance, sharing his bigotry with this comment: “Of course they are hard-working. They mean well. Just close[d]-minded, provincial, angry & easily misled.” Also on Twitter, children’s author J. K. Rowling described Trump as a “monster of narcissism.” What had set off Rowling’s series of tweets excoriating Trump was a short video clip which she took to show him ignoring the outstretched hand of a child in a wheelchair; Rowling responded with “How stunning, and how horrible, that Trump cannot bring himself to shake the hand of a small boy who only wanted to touch the President.” A full-length recording of the event, however, showed that Trump had in fact paid a great deal of attention to the boy at the event. Moreover, the child’s mother took to her Facebook page to rebut Rowling’s mistaken impression: “If someone can please get a message to JK Rowling: Trump didn’t snub my son & Monty wasn’t even trying to shake his hand. (1. He’s 3 and hand shaking is not his thing 2. he was showing off his newly acquired secret service patch.)” Rowling subsequently acknowledged her error and deleted the tweets, but did not recant her comments about Trump.

In recent years many comedians have chosen to include politics or political figures in their material, but for the most part they would maintain a wry, satirical tone. Some changed their approach when dealing with Trump and his supporters, becoming far more aggressive and harsh in their material. For instance, Jim Carrey sent out a tweet about the Trump rally mentioned above: “Tonight in West Virginia @realDonaldTrump is expected to EAT A BABY on stage to the delight of his zombie base. #walkingdead.” He included a still image in the tweet, a line drawing caricature of Trump with a splotch of red on the mouth and chin. It seems fair to observe that, if this is humor, there is nothing subtle about it. Presumably Carrey believed his fans would find it amusing.
Sometimes when comedians attempt to seriously weigh in on political matters, there can be unintentional humor. This was the case with a pair of tweets from Chelsea Handler. In the first, she seemed to be concerned about a potential move toward authoritarianism in the Trump era: “What’s happening in the state of Missouri [referring to the governor’s decision to deploy state law enforcement resources in high-crime areas of St. Louis] is scary and unacceptable. If we don’t speak up, this whole country could become a military state.” A few days later, she invoked the meme that Trump was mentally defective and called for the U.S. military to depose the president: “To all the generals surrounding our idiot-in-chief... [in original] the longer U wait to remove him, the longer UR name will appear negatively in history.” Presumably, Handler meant the two tweets unironically. Nonetheless, a number of observers took note of a contradiction. One paraphrased them in this way:

America is in serious danger of becoming a military state.

*Four days later*
What America really needs is a good military coup.

A vital aspect of the craft of comedy is to push the limit of acceptability without crossing over that limit. It seems that late-night host Stephen Colbert managed to just barely get away with a salty monologue addressed to Trump, personally. Saying he was mad at Trump for referring to CBS colleague John Dickerson’s show as “Deface the Nation,” Colbert began with a string of puns similar to Trump’s (including “You’re not the POTUS, you’re the BLOATUS,” “You’re the Presi-Dunce,” and referring to the Trump administration as “Disgrace the Nation”) but then moved into some direct insults. In the clip, the studio audience’s enjoyment can be heard through the entire segment, but the climax of the monologue did become controversial: “Sir, you attract more skinheads than free Rogaine. You have more people marching against you than cancer. You talk like a sign-language gorilla who got hit in the head. In fact, the only thing your mouth is good for is being Vladimir Putin’s cock holster.” The last sentence was considered by many to be homophobic; Colbert found it necessary to express regret over his word choice, but stopped short of apologizing for his rude remarks to the president:

Now, if you saw my monologue Monday, you know that I was a little upset at Donald Trump for insulting a friend of mine. So at the end of that monologue I had a few choice insults for the President in return. I don’t regret that... So while I would do it again, I would change a few words that were cruder than they needed to be.
Even less subtle than the caricature Carrey included in his tweet was a still photo Kathy Griffin created with celebrity photographer Tyler Shields and gave to the entertainment gossip outlet, TMZ. Mimicking the composition and staging of ISIS beheading images, Griffin is shown holding up a theatrical prop severed head of Trump covered in blood, her expression deadpan as she looks into the camera lens positioned exactly perpendicular to the plane of her body. Part of the media package given to TMZ was a “making of” video. It seems apparent that Griffin expected this creation to be received favorably, but it proved to be a bit much for many people. Met with an uproar rather than applause following the release of the photo, Griffin apologized and declared it had not been her intention to advocate Trump’s assassination.

Neither Carrey’s nor Handler’s tweets seem to have generated any great amount of public attention, positive or negative. Both Colbert’s rant and Griffin’s photo did, however. Colbert benefitted, if anything. Griffin suffered some negative consequence. Of interest, here, is that whether one finds the examples humorous or offensive, the comedians’ apparent intent was to please their respective audiences by othering Trump, his supporters, or both.

TRUMP’S PERSONALITY AND STATE OF MIND

During both the campaign and the start of the administration, some of the attacks on Trump centered on purported defects in his personality or mental health; that thread can be seen in a number of the examples mentioned above. Again, the attacks came from partisans on both the left and on the right. For instance, Eugene Robinson offered this take during the campaign:

During the primary season, as Donald Trump’s bizarre outbursts helped him crush the competition, I thought he was being crazy like a fox. Now I am increasingly convinced that he’s just plain crazy. . . . At this point, it would be irresponsible to ignore the fact that Trump’s grasp on reality appears to be tenuous at best.

Robert Kagan, who left the Republican Party and endorsed Clinton in the 2016 election, described Trump during the campaign as “a man with a disordered personality.” Charles Blow added a racial twist to this theme, and claimed this explained Trump’s appeal to his supporters:

Trump is a mirror. He is a reflection of—indeed a revealing of—the ugliness that you [i.e., Trump supporters] harbor, only it is possible that you may have gone your life expressing it in ways that were more coded and politic. Trump is an unfiltered primal scream of the fragility and fear consuming white male America.
Richard Kelsey had this to say, around the one-hundred-day mark of the administration: “It’s hard being an American conservative right now. . . . The President of the United States is a nut job, to use his own phrase. He’s stone-cold crazy. . . . [a] self-serving, crude, narcissistic, ego-maniac who is really an insecure man with the trappings of power.”

Amateur psychoanalysis is not all that rare in political talk, even if it does seem to have peaked in this election cycle. Speculation as to Trump’s mental health was not confined to the pundit class, though, and that is an unusual feature. It is of particular interest given that in 1973 the American Psychiatric Association adopted an ethical tenet explicitly prohibiting its members from making such public statements, as practicing professionals. It became known as the “Goldwater rule,” since it was included in the ethical code in response to psychiatrists participating in a magazine poll about Barry Goldwater’s mental fitness for office during the 1964 presidential campaign. This appears in Section 7 of the code, and remains in effect:

> On occasion psychiatrists are asked for an opinion about an individual who is in the light of public attention or who has disclosed information about himself/herself through public media. In such circumstances, a psychiatrist may share with the public his or her expertise about psychiatric issues in general. However, it is unethical for a psychiatrist to offer a professional opinion unless he or she has conducted an examination and has been granted proper authorization for such a statement.

Similar constraints (whether codified rules or guidance from the organization) apply to members of the American Psychological Association and the American Psychoanalytic Association.

The rule generated periodic discussion but no particular controversy from its adoption until the 2016 campaign, when some professionals began to assert that Trump’s personality defects were evident in his public appearances, and that the purported mental health problems were so severe as to pose a danger to the country should he be elected. They justified the violation of the Goldwater rule on the grounds that their duty to warn the public overrode the ethical constraint against making public, remote (i.e., not based on personal contact with the individual), unauthorized diagnoses. This appears to be a considerable stretch of the traditional understanding of the duty to warn principle, which requires professionals to breach confidentiality when they are in possession of clinical information indicating an imminent danger to the public, such as a patient of theirs they believed might become violent. In contrast, public statements that Trump had a defective personality would not be disclosing clinical details obtained in a private therapist/patient setting, but instead would be a diagnosis of mental illness based solely on transcripts and recordings of his public appearances and statements.
Nonetheless, this initiative outlived the campaign and, if anything, grew in the early period of the administration. The stated goal shifted from defeating a candidate to removing a sitting president from office. A report described a conference panel in this way:

Donald Trump has a “dangerous mental illness” and is not fit to lead the US, a group of psychiatrists warned during a conference at Yale University. Mental health experts claimed the President was “paranoid and delusional,” and said it was their “ethical responsibility” to warn the American public about the “dangers” Mr. Trump’s psychological state poses to the country.\(^ {75} \)

In an earlier interview, one of the invited participants on that panel, Dr. John Gardner, had described his rationale for violating the Goldwater rule:

The psychiatric interview is hardly the gold standard, by the way. If you have massive amounts of information about a person’s behavior, that can be more accurate. And we have that. If the question is whether we can form a diagnosis from that information, I think it’s clear that we can.

In our field, we have a duty to warn. If a patient says they [sic] might harm someone, you’re mandated by law to violate constitutionality [presumably he meant “confidentiality”] to warn that person. We’re talking about a need to warn all people that this person [i.e., Trump] is a threat to world peace because of his psychiatric disorder.\(^ {76} \)

As one would expect, this theme was echoed in the popular press.\(^ {77} \)

**FINAL COMMENTARY**

Much of the political rhetoric in this campaign stayed within the traditional boundaries. The examples in the preceding sections were not intended to be broadly representative of the entire corpus of campaign rhetoric, but instead to illustrate a particular current in that flood, one that was out-of-the-ordinary for presidential election cycles. For instance, the examples described above of conservative pundits signing on to the #NeverTrump position should not be taken as evidence that establishment conservative pundits, as a unified sector of the political sphere, opposed Trump in the campaign and the early period of the administration. Defenses of Trump and empathy for his supporters appeared, and a particular theme in these is rebuttal to the “He’s not one of us” running through the #NeverTrump writing during the campaign; this is especially true after the inauguration of the new administration, when it began to implement its promised policy and funding changes.\(^ {78} \)

Neither were the examples intended to make the case Trump, his supporters, or both, were the innocent victims of pernicious attacks from unprincipled enemies. It seems to me at least arguable that since the Trump campaign
sometimes engaged in name-calling, it could be accused of othering, and it was a charge that was often vigorously leveled by critics of Trump and his campaign. That question is beyond the scope of this chapter—although it seems worthwhile to note in passing that the so-called “Muslim ban” executive order, often mentioned in accusations that Trump was engaging in othering, was actually not based on religion, but rather on the country of origin;\textsuperscript{79} the way the controversy was short-handed in many press accounts and commentary as a “Muslim ban” essentially was a distortion.

Those disclaimers made, I believe the examples do show that in this campaign several prominent lines of attack against Trump or supporters can be reasonably seen as othering, do go beyond ad hominem, and are different in nature from the customary jousting in a political competition. As noted earlier, a bright line distinction between allowable attack rhetoric and objectionable attacks is difficult to make with regard to the issue of othering. Certainly, it is desirable for the candidates and any other participants in the political discourse to contrast their positions, preferences, and understandings of the current situation with that of their rivals; one would hope this might lead to a more informed electorate. This is othering in the traditional meaning, from phenomenology: one understands one’s life world (self) in relation to that of others; it is to be expected that candidates would rally their supporters by contrasting “us” with “them” in a credo of core beliefs.

Name-calling is indeed an unpleasant feature of bare-knuckle politics; I am hard put to see such ad hominem tactics as constructive additions. But in my estimation the line is crossed from ad hominem into othering (in the contemporary sense of marginalization, delegitimation, rendering subaltern) when the speech acts primarily demonize the rival (or his supporters) as being less than human, or imply that the Other does not deserve full participation in the collective decision process we call elections, but, rather, deserves any and all abuse it receives. It is helpful to consider Jürgen Habermas’s notion of the ideal discourse, and the conduct rules his student Robert Alexy developed as a way of implementing it:

\begin{enumerate}
\item Every subject with the competence to speak and act is allowed to take part in a discourse.
\item a. Everyone is allowed to question any assertion whatever.
\item b. Everyone is allowed to introduce any assertion whatever into the discourse.
\item c. Everyone is allowed to express his attitudes, desires, and needs.
\item No speaker may be prevented, by internal or external coercion, from exercising his rights as laid down in (3.1) and (3.2).\textsuperscript{80}
\end{enumerate}
I am under no illusion that human behavior is perfectible, either by persuasion or by regulation—but those rules seem constructive as guiding principles as to what is acceptable and what is not.

With that as a framework, it seems to me that the examples described in the preceding sections do cross a line between the traditional sense of othering (acceptable, potentially constructive) into the contemporary sense of othering as marginalization (unacceptable, damaging). Absent a proper clinical diagnosis, labelling Trump as insane or having a defective personality—and hence deserving exclusion from an election or removal from office—seems to violate the first rule; so, too, does stereotyping Trump voters as ignorant dupes too stupid to know what is in their best interest. Arguing that Trump raised problematics about issues that may not be problematized (i.e., it is impermissible to question trends considered by some to be evolution toward “social justice”) seems to violate the second set of rules. Dismissing Trump’s supporters as (to cut to the chase) white trash likewise seems to violate the second set of rules that they ought to be allowed to voice their personal concerns about the direction of the country and how it might affect their lives. Attempts to suppress speech supporting Trump by disrupting public events seems to violate the third rule. In short, the bar should be very high for would-be participants to be delegitimated and excluded—and such a move must be thoroughly grounded in factual evidence. Defending delegitimation requires much more than the interpretive assertion “But that’s how good people like me see it; it’s the only way a good person can see it.”

On the face of it, it seems contradictory that many people who, themselves, decry othering (in its contemporary usage) engaged in othering Trump and his supporters in this election cycle. I have not seen an explicit justification of the apparent violation of what is otherwise treated as a categorical imperative, beyond insinuating that this candidate and his supporters are such an egregious case they do not deserve the protection. This is similar to the explanation alt-left activist groups such as Antifa and By Any Means Necessary offer when questioned about their use of violence and fascist tactics to interfere with free speech. Perhaps they are so certain their perspective on a political issue is just that their actions (speech, or physical) constitute “hating what is hateful and . . . loving what deserves love,” as Alice Miller described recovery from childhood trauma. But taking that position, itself, would constitute othering.

In addition to what appears to be a substantial threat to the traditional understanding of free speech and First Amendment rights (viz., leftist advocates justifying their use of street violence to disrupt the expression of political viewpoints they find repugnant), there is a parallel concern that many journalists and media outlets have seemingly abandoned any pretense of impartiality in covering the election or the new administration. One veteran mainstream journalist worried, during the campaign, that his profession was
making a fatal mistake by weakening its ethical tenet of objectivity in straight news reporting:

Donald Trump may or may not fix his campaign, and Hillary Clinton may or may not become the first female president. But something else happening before our eyes is almost as important: the complete collapse of American journalism as we know it. . . .

The shameful display of naked partisanship by the elite media is unlike anything seen in modern America. The largest broadcast networks—CBS, NBC and ABC—and major newspapers like the New York Times and Washington Post have jettisoned all pretense of fair play. Their fierce determination to keep Trump out of the Oval Office has no precedent. 85

What prompted his concern was not just that the coverage seemed to heavily portray Clinton in a favorable light and Trump in an unfavorable light, but that some elite journalists had begun to openly justify taking sides. He pointed to a recent opinion piece in the New York Times:

If you're a working journalist and you believe that Donald J. Trump is a demagogue playing to the nation's worst racist and nationalistic tendencies, that he cozies up to anti-American dictators and that he would be dangerous with control of the United State nuclear codes, how the heck are you supposed to cover him? . . .

If you view a Trump presidency as something that's potentially dangerous, then your reporting is going to reflect that. You would move closer than you've ever been to being oppositional. 86

Full exploration of those two corollary issues is beyond the scope of this chapter. Still, they deserve mention here as clear negative externalities of a recent trend in campaign rhetoric. The common thread is that behaviors long considered to be violations of law or professional ethics are starting to be justified (falsely, in my view) as virtuously confronting the Other.

Whatever the motivation or rationale, the othering of Donald Trump and his supporters seems to me to be a corrosive development in the last election, and it shows no sign of abating in the near future.

NOTES

6. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
20. Ibid.

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid.


38. Ibid.


41. Ibid.


50. Ibid.

51. Ibid.


55. Ibid.

56. Ibid.


58. Ibid.


65. Herman Wong, “CNN Cuts Ties with Kathy Griffin.”


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