

What can Carl Jung tell us about the appeal of populist politics?

Economic inequality, globalisation and the failures of mainstream politicians have all been put forward as potential factors facilitating the rise of populist politics. But alongside this political and economic context, is there also a psychological context that can help explain the success of populist politicians? [John Dreijmanis](#) writes on what the work of Carl Jung can tell us about the appeal of populism.

In the last few years, the electoral successes of populist politicians in some western democracies have been attributed to various socio-economic and political factors. This is broadly true, but there is also a significant psychological dimension which has been neglected as a contributory factor.

The Swiss psychologist and psychiatrist Carl G. Jung (1875-1961) founded analytical psychology, an important part of which is the concept of the [collective unconscious](#). Briefly, aside from an individual's unconscious, Jung believed that there is also a universal and collective unconscious in all individuals, derived from ancestral experience and memory. It consists of archetypes, or persistent forms, which become conscious and take their shape from an individual conscious.

The number of archetypes depends upon the number of typical life experiences. When a situation arises corresponding to a particular archetype, that one is activated. There may also be competing archetypes. Societal neuroses are dangerous forces present in the archetypes; they can be activated with unforeseen consequences by individuals whose conscious has a remarkable access to their unconscious.

The mass appeal of populist politicians is based upon their capacity to propose actions which many people support, but are afraid to propose themselves. They promise fundamental changes and are able to secure substantial electoral support. Jung himself cited the leaders of Italian fascism and German national socialism as evidence for his theory, for instance in relation to the reappearance of the old Roman salute. It should be noted, of course, that the consequences of this style of politics need not always be as calamitous as in these two cases.

The collective unconscious in action

The 2017 French and the 2016 American presidential elections presented interesting case studies of the role of the collective unconscious in populist politics. The former election occurred within the context of persistently high unemployment and a loss of trust in the existing political system. Marine Le Pen of the Front National denounced financial globalisation and related it to Islamic globalisation.

There were parallels here with historical experiences of the Muslim invasions of southern and eastern Europe from the seventh century to the end of the seventeenth century. This experience was in effect activated from the collective unconscious and directed against Muslim immigrants and refugees in the early twenty-first century. To deal with these and other matters, Le Pen promised to suspend the Schengen Area, while expelling those foreigners being monitored by the intelligence services and those with criminal convictions. She also argued that the EU should be restructured as a far looser entity – failing this, there should be a referendum on leaving it. Le Pen ultimately lost to Emmanuel Macron, but nevertheless received 33.9 per cent of the vote in the second round, nearly double what her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen, received in 2002.

In the United States, Donald Trump, a candidate with little political experience, defeated a field of far more experienced politicians to secure the Republican Party's presidential nomination. Trump built his campaign around the use of Twitter, and much like Le Pen, at a time of rising economic inequality and declining optimism about the future, he made blunt and succinct statements articulating what many thought should be said and done on a broad range of matters.

His message was similarly anti-Islam and anti-immigrant, even to the point of famously promising to build an impenetrable wall along the United States-Mexico border. Economic protectionism was proposed as a solution to the unemployment problem, as well as a major public works programme, while his 'Make America great again' slogan effectively promised to return the country to the glory of an earlier era. As we now know, this strategy of activating the collective unconscious, built as it was on American historical experiences, was highly successful in carrying Trump into the White House.

For both Le Pen and Trump, the socio-economic context of rising economic inequality, coupled with the political context – notably the policies of their opponents – had an impact on their success. Macron's performance in office will be crucial in dictating the opportunities available for Le Pen to win future campaigns, while Trump's performance in office will have an important impact on his re-election chances. Yet it is also important to recognise the *psychological context* within which such campaigns operate. Understanding Jung's collective unconscious, and the ancestral experiences and memory which shape it, might go some way to helping us comprehend the future successes of populist politicians.

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John Dreijmanis is a retired Professor of Political Science, formerly at the University of Bremen. His most recent interests include Max Weber and Carl G. Jung. He has edited *Max Weber's Complete Writings on Academic and Political Vocations*, tr. Gordon C. Wells (New York: Algora Publishing, 2008) and a revised and updated German edition in 2017. In the introduction he analysed Weber according to Jung's theory of psychological types and its implications.