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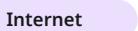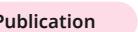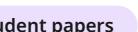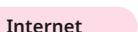
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Reviving the Nation: A Lacanian Perspective on Trump's MAGA Fantasy

Imelda Masni Juniaty Sianipar[1,2] Aarce Tehupeiory[2,3]

[1]Department of International Relations, Universitas Kristen Indonesia
[2]Doctor of Law Program, Universitas Kristen Indonesia
[3]Center for Social Justice and Global Responsibility, Universitas Kristen Indonesia

ABSTRACT

This article analyses Donald Trump's power fantasies centered on his "Make America Great Again (MAGA)" campaign. In his 2017 inauguration, Trump depicted the U.S. as a nation in decline, needing restoration. This study shows that Trump's MAGA narrative is crafted to address perceived national decay. Using descriptive qualitative methods and Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, the research examines Trump's speeches and statements to understand this narrative. By attributing the nation's problems to external and internal pressures, the MAGA message aligns with public anxieties and creates antagonisms. The findings reveal that this narrative reinforces Trump's political power and shapes national identity with promises of returning to past greatness. Trump positions himself as a symbolic "Big Other," a savior who resolves perceived threats and restores order. The MAGA narrative taps into collective desires for identity, belonging, and control, uniting supporters through shared grievances and externalized blame. This appeal resonates with deep psychological needs, creating cycles of temporary satisfaction and deferred fulfillment, which sustains loyalty and hope.

Keywords: Political Fantasies, National Revival, Make America Great Again, Lacanian Psychoanalysis, Antagonism

ABSTRAK

Artikel ini menganalisis fantasi kekuasaan Donald Trump yang berpusat pada kampanye "Make America Great Again (MAGA)". Dalam pidato pelantikannya tahun 2017, Trump menggambarkan AS sebagai negara yang sedang merosot dan memerlukan pemulihan. Studi ini menunjukkan bahwa narasi MAGA dirancang untuk merespons persepsi kemunduran nasional. Dengan metode deskriptif kualitatif dan teori psikoanalisis Lacan, penelitian ini menganalisis pidato dan pernyataan Trump untuk memahami konstruksi narasi tersebut. Dengan mengaitkan masalah negara dengan tekanan eksternal dan internal, pesan MAGA selaras dengan kecemasan publik dan menciptakan antagonisme. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa narasi ini memperkuat kekuasaan politik Trump dan membentuk identitas nasional dengan janji kembali ke kejayaan masa lalu. Trump memposisikan dirinya sebagai simbol *"Big Other",* penyelamat yang mengatasi ancaman dan memulihkan ketertiban. Narasi MAGA meresap ke dalam keinginan kolektif akan identitas, rasa memiliki, dan kontrol, menyatukan pendukungnya melalui keluhan bersama dan pengalihan kesalahan ke pihak luar. Daya tarik ini beresonansi dengan kebutuhan psikologis yang mendalam, menciptakan siklus kepuasan sementara dan pemenuhan yang tertunda, yang mempertahankan loyalitas dan harapan.

Kata Kunci: Fantasi Politik, Kebangkitan Nasional, MAGA, Psikoanalisis Lacanian, Antagonisme

Introduction

Donald Trump revolutionized American politics with his populist *"Make America Again"* (MAGA) slogan, which became the central theme of his 2016 presidential campaign. His victory in securing the Republican nomination for President came as a surprise to many, including perhaps Trump himself. [1] Trump skillfully tapped into widespread frustrations with globalization, economic inequality, and the perceived erosion of American values, portraying the U.S. as weakened by political elites and external pressures such as immigration and unfair trade practices.

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[1] Dennis Tourish, "It Is Time to Use the F Word about Trump: Fascism, Populism and the Rebirth of History," *Leadership* 20, no. 1 (2024): 9–32, https://doi.org/10.1177/17427150231210732.

Positioning himself as the leader to reverse this decline, Trump promised to restore the nation's former glory by prioritizing domestic interests and reducing international commitments. In his inaugural address as the 45th President of the United States, Trump emphasized returning power to the people, stating:

> *Today's ceremony, however, has very special meaning. Because today we are not merely transferring power from one Administration to another, or from one party to another – but we are transferring power from Washington, D.C. and giving it back to you, the American People.*[2]

Trump's political narrative invoked a nostalgic vision of an idealized American past characterized by economic strength, military power, and cultural dominance. The MAGA campaign emerged as a powerful force, promising economic protectionism, stricter immigration policies, and a return to traditional American values.[3] The slogan resonated deeply with voters who felt marginalized by globalization and cultural shifts, as Trump pointed to external forces and political elites as causes of America's decline.

This narrative was further reinforced by Trump's controversial statements linking demographic changes to national decline, which many commentators argued appealed to White Americans longing for a less diverse past. Exit polls from the 2016 election supported this view, showing that White voters favored Trump over Hillary Clinton by a 20-point margin. Post-election analyses identified opposition to increasing non-White populations and anti-globalization sentiments as significant drivers of his support. For many of Trump's followers, MAGA was a promise to return to an era marked by overt racial and gender hierarchies—a promise on which Trump appeared committed to delivering.[4]

The concept of fantasy is rarely discussed in mainstream political theory.[5] McMillan (2017) contributes to the understanding of Trump's MAGA fantasy by describing it as an influential political tool that responds to disruptions in American identity and the myth of exceptionalism by promising a return to an idealized past. This narrative identifies antagonistic forces to explain perceived losses and positions Trump as the leader capable of restoring the nation. However, McMillan notes that such fantasies are not unique to Trump; they are common political strategies that can be adopted by different ideologies, including Democratic movements, to address and reshape national identity.[6] This article goes further by using Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory to explain how and why such political fantasies are created and maintained. This deeper understanding reveals that political fantasies, like MAGA, resonate not just because of their surface promises but because they tap into deeper psychological needs and desires within the collective consciousness.

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[2] "The Inaugural Address" (The White House, January 20, 2017),
https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/the-inaugural-address/.
[3] Jason Breckenridge, "Make America Great Again (MAGA): The Covert Call for Colonialism's Comeback," 2024, ssrn:
https://ssrn.com/abstrac.
[4] Paul Krugman, "When MAGA Fantasy Meets Rust Belt Reality" (The New York Times, November 29, 2019),
https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/29/opinion/maga-trump-manufacturing.html.
[5] Jason Glynos and Yannis Stavrakakis, "Lacan and Political Subjectivity: Fantasy and Enjoyment in Psychoanalysis and Political Theory," *Subjectivity* 24, no. 1 (2008): 256–74, https://doi.org/10.1057/sub.2008.23.
[6] Chris McMillan, "MakeAmericaGreatAgain: Ideological Fantasy, American Exceptionalism and Donald Trump," *Subjectivity* 10, no. 2 (2017): 204–22, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41286-017-0024-z.

Recent studies show that populism is shaped not only by economic [7] [8] and political factors [9] [10] [11] [12] but also by psychological dynamics and collective fantasies. Marie Rudden and Stephanie Brandt (2018) offer one of the earlier contributions by highlighting group-level psychoanalytic processes that help explain the strong loyalty of Trump's supporters.[13] Florentina Andreescu (2019) expands this view by demonstrating how cultural shifts, from a disciplinary society to one organized around enjoyment, and from symbolic authority to a culture of spectacle, create affective conditions that intensify the appeal of populist figures. [14] Stefan Bird-Pollan (2023) further argues that populism arises from clashes between different conceptions of autonomy situated along a continuum of self-determination. [15] Most recently, Karin Johanna Zienert-Eilts (2023) deepens the psychoanalytic perspective with her concept of "perverted containing," explaining how regression into a paranoid–schizoid mode disrupts democratic containment and strengthens destructive leader–follower bonds.[16] Together, these studies illuminate the symbolic and affective landscape in which contemporary populism develops. Nevertheless, the literature still contains a notable lacuna, with very few works apply Lacanian theory to explain how Trump's political fantasies are produced, circulated, and emotionally sustained in public discourse. This gap is crucial, since the force of Trump's appeal does not lie only in his protectionist, isolationist, or confrontational policy positions. It also lies in the fantasy structures that organize feelings of loss, anger, and hope among his supporters.

This article argues that the core of Trump's political appeal can be better understood through Lacan's concepts of lack, big other, mirror, objet petit a, antagonism, desire and jouissance as well as fantasy. Through a close reading of his key speeches, the study shows how Trump constructs a narrative of a nation that has been robbed, a future that can be restored, and a leader who is positioned as the symbolic point of return for a wounded collective identity. Understanding this fantasy is crucial, as Trump's populist rhetoric continues to shape American politics. His protectionist, isolationist, and confrontational stances draw strength from a shared vision of national decline and revival. By revealing how these fantasies work beneath surface-level appeals and persist through symbolic and psychological mechanisms, the study broadens the understanding of political campaigns through a psychoanalytic lens.

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[7] Dani Rodrik, "Populism and The Economics of Globalization," *Journal of International Business Policy* 1, no. 1–2 (2018): 12–33, https://doi.org/10.1057/s42214-018-0001-4.,

[8] Rudiger Dornbusch and Sebastian Edwards, "Macroeconomics Populism," *Journal of Development Economics* 32 (1990): 247–77, https://doi.org/10.2307/2234264.

[9] Kurt Weyland, "Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics," *Comparative Politics* 34, no. 1 (2001): 1–22, https://doi.org/10.2307/422412.,

[10] Cas Mudde, "Populism: An Ideational Approach," in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Pierre Kaltwasser, Cristóbal Rovira; Taggart, Paul; Espejo, Paulina Ochoa; Ostiguy (Oxford University Press, 2017), https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198803560.001.0001.

[11] Weyland, "Clarifying a Contested Concept: Populism in the Study of Latin American Politics."

[12] Mudde, "Populism: An Ideational Approach."

[13] Marie Rudden and Stephanie Brandt, "Donald Trump as Leader: Psychoanalytic Perspectives," *Int J Appl Psychoanal Studies*, 2018, 1–9, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1002/aps.1560.

[14] Florentina C Andreescu, "Donald Trump's Appeal: A Socio-Psychoanalytic Analysis," *Journal for Cultural Research* 23, no. 4 (2019): 348–64, https://doi.org/10.1080/14797585.2019.1703342.

[15] Stefan Bird-Pollan, "A Psychoanalytic Conceptual Framework for Understanding Populism," *Philosophy \& Social Criticism* 49, no. 1 (2023): 35–59, https://doi.org/10.1177/01914537211040570.

[16] Karin Johanna Zienert-Eilts, "Destructive Populism as 'Perverted Containing': A Psychoanalytical Look at the Attraction of Donald Trump," *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 101, no. 5 (2020): 971–91, https://doi.org/10.1080/00207578.2020.1827955.

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Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory

Jacques Lacan developed psychoanalytic theory by emphasizing that humans are born in a state of incompleteness, which he terms lack.[17] From the earliest moments of life, we experience separation from what once felt whole, producing an enduring sense that something essential is missing. This lack is not a flaw to be repaired but the very condition that makes us human. It is the silent engine that drives our search for meaning, recognition, and belonging.

This search begins in the *mirror stage*, when the infant first encounters its reflection and identifies with the image. The image appears coherent, complete, and controlled, qualities the infant does not yet possess internally. This moment of misrecognition creates an idealized version of the self, a template of wholeness that the subject will pursue throughout life. From this point on, identity is never discovered but continually constructed through images, roles, and figures that promise to restore that early sense of unity.

As we grow, we enter the *Symbolic order*, the world of language, rules, and shared meanings governed by what Lacan calls the *Big Other*. The Big Other is society's invisible authority such as institutions, norms, moral codes, and cultural narratives. It tells us how to speak, behave, and understand ourselves. We depend on the Big Other to stabilize our world, to assure us that things make sense. Yet because no institution is ever perfect, the Big Other inevitably cracks. When it fails, doubt and anxiety arise, creating openings for new sources of meaning.

Inside this symbolic landscape, we pursue an elusive object that Lacan names *objet petit a,* the object-cause of desire which is not the object itself but what evokes and maintains desire.[18] Lacan identifies desire as a continuous drive, a fundamental longing that is never fully satisfied.[19] It is not a tangible thing but the shimmering promise that something "out there" will finally complete us such as success, love, national greatness, or redemption. Because this object is always out of reach, it keeps desire alive. The subject moves from one imagined solution to another, never arriving, always longing.

To make this longing livable, we weave *fantasy*. Fantasy becomes the primary mechanism through which desire is articulated and sustained. Lacan explains that fantasy frames reality within an imagined narrative that offers the illusion of fulfillment, even though the object of desire remains unattainable.[20] Through fantasy, we come to believe that if only we obtain a certain job, partner, leader, or political project, the gap at the center of life will close.

Yet even when these fantasies fail, we remain attached, because they offer not just meaning but *jouissance,* a form of intense, sometimes troubling enjoyment. Jouissance emerges in the thrill of striving, in the drama of conflict, and in the emotional charge of identification. It is the pleasure we take in our desires, even when they bring frustration.

In Lacanian thought, the subject is thus propelled by lack, shaped by images, stabilized by symbolic authority, driven by unattainable objects, organized by fantasy, and energized by jouissance. Together, these elements form the dynamic structure through which humans make sense of both themselves and their political worlds.

Fantasy

The concept of fantasy remains a subject of ongoing debate [21], yet in this research it is grounded in the psychoanalytic traditions of Freud and Lacan. In 1897, Freud discovered that many patients' reports of childhood seduction were not actual memories but fantasies created by the mind.

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[17] Kirk Turner, "Lacan's Fantasy: The Birth of the Clinical Concept," *International Journal of Žižek Studies* 11, no. 2 (2017).
[18] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques Alain-Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (W.W. Norton & Company, 1998).
[19] Rex Butler and Slavoj Žižek, *The Žižek Dictionary* (Routledge, 2014).
[20] Butler and Žižek.
[21] Jason Glynos, "Fantasy and Identity in Critical Political Theory," *Filozofski Vestnik* 32, no. 2 (2011): 65–88.

This shifted the understanding of fantasy, previously seen as mere distortion, fantasy became, for Freud, a psychological mechanism through which the mind expresses conflicts, desires, and frustrations that cannot be articulated directly.

In Lacanian theory, fantasy represents the paradoxical relationship between the 'barred' or 'castrated' Subject ($) and the imaginary object of desire, *l'objet petit autre (a)*. [22] Lacan's matheme for neurotic fantasy is:

Figure 1: Lacan's fantasy formula[23]

$$\$ \diamond a$$

This formula shows the impossible yet necessary relation between the barred Subject ($), marked by a sense of lack, and object a, the object-cause of desire. The diamond symbol or lozenge (poincon) (◊) represents the shifting tension between the two: envelopment-development-conjunction-disjunction, includes alienation (∨) and separation (∧), greater than (>), less than (<), and so on, emphasizing the tension between the subject and the object a, which is central in Lacanian theory because it functions as the cause of desire, the element that keeps desire alive and prevents it from ever being fully satisfied.[24]

Fantasy functions as the screen that stabilizes the subject's identity by covering the void at its center. It offers a narrative that bridges the symbolic order (language, law, norms) and the real (what resists symbolization). Through this structure, fantasy shields the subject from anxiety caused by the absence of an ultimate guarantee such as God, Reason, Nation, or History, while simultaneously sustaining desire by staging a scenario in which fulfilment appears attainable.[25]

This structure extends beyond the individual and becomes fully political when shared collectively. Fantasy organizes public emotions by framing obstacles such as immigrants, elites, conspirators, or economic decline, as the barriers preventing fullness. The fantasy works by promising that once these obstacles are removed, satisfaction will follow. This promise produces jouissance, a morally ambiguous enjoyment that emerges not only from the fantasy of fulfilment but also from confronting, punishing, or expelling the perceived obstacle.

Populist rhetoric becomes effective when it taps directly into this structure. It turns diffuse anxieties into a coherent narrative, linking personal frustrations to broader antagonisms. Fantasies serve as a hinge between cherished ideals and the darker, often disavowed dimensions of political life, organizing collective identity and motivating action.[26]

Trump's "Make America Great Again" perfectly illustrates this mechanism. His discourse constructs a fantasy of a stolen greatness, a wounded nation deprived of its symbolic coherence. Immigrants, Muslims, global elites, and foreign competitors are framed as the object-obstacles preventing national wholeness.[27]   In Lacanian terms, Trump positions himself within the fantasy structure as the agent who can realign the relationship $ ◊ a, promising to restore what was lost. This political fantasy mobilizes desire, stabilizes identity, and produces jouissance, transforming populist rhetoric into a powerful engine of affective and electoral mobilization.[28]

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[22] James S Ormrod, *Fantasy and Social Movements* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

[23] Ormrod.

[24] Ormrod.

[25] Glynos, "Fantasy and Identity in Critical Political Theory."

[26] Glynos and Stavrakakis, "Lacan and Political Subjectivity: Fantasy and Enjoyment in Psychoanalysis and Political Theory."

[27] Glynos, "Fantasy and Identity in Critical Political Theory."

[28] Glynos.

Methodology

This study employs a descriptive qualitative method alongside Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory to examine Donald Trump's construction of the "Make America Great Again" (MAGA) narrative. The study's primary data include full-text official speeches from reputable and verifiable government archives, including https://www.whitehouse.gov/; https://www.state.gov/ and https://www.archives.gov/, selected for rhetorical significance, MAGA messaging, and themes of nationalism and populism. These cover campaign rallies (2015–2016), the 2016 Republican National Convention (RNC) acceptance speech, and the 2017 Inaugural Address to identify how themes such as nationalism, decline, threat, and antagonism are deployed to frame a vision of national revival. Secondary data from scholarly publications and reputable media contextualize Trump's discourse. All texts were verified and organized chronologically.

Analytical Procedures

The analysis followed three stages. First, initial coding identified key themes in Trump's speeches, such as nationalism, threat construction, decline, restoration, and antagonism, capturing recurring rhetorical patterns. Second, thematic categorization grouped these codes into broader categories like "national decline," "enemy construction," "nationalism," and "revival," highlighting consistent narrative structures across speeches. Third, Lacanian concepts were applied to analyze Trump's speeches. Passages portraying America as weakened, such as "Our country is in decline", were coded as Lack. Representations of a strong, idealized nation, like "We will make America great again", reflected the Mirror Stage. Appeals to authority and national identity, for example "I will protect American jobs and borders", were analyzed as the Big Other, while concrete symbols like "the wall" or the slogan "America First" functioned as Objet petit a. Promises of restored greatness were coded as Desire, narratives framing threats as surmountable, such as "We will defeat our enemies and protect our people", as Fantasy, and public emotional reactions—cheers and applause were interpreted as Jouissance. This approach highlights how Trump constructs populist political fantasy through language, symbols, and collective affect.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the analysis, two key strategies were prioritized. Triangulation was employed by cross-referencing interpretations with secondary literature on populism, political psychology, and discourse studies, ensuring that findings were grounded in established scholarship. Peer debriefing involved consultation with two independent readers who reviewed coding decisions and thematic interpretations, helping to verify consistency and reduce subjective bias. Together, these strategies strengthened the credibility and trustworthiness of the study's analytical process.

Analysis

a. Barred Subject ($): Fragmented Identity and National Crisis

Donald Trump's Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement has evolved into a powerful expression of nostalgia, identity, and desire within American politics. Introduced on June 16, 2015, when Trump announced his candidacy, the slogan "Make America Great Again" resonated with a vision of reclaiming what many see as a lost period of American strength and prosperity.[29] In his 2015 presidential campaign, Donald Trump boldly stated that the United States, once a leading global power, was now *"in serious trouble."* [30] He attributed the nation's economic struggles to external forces, particularly competition from China and Japan, and vowed to *"bring back our jobs and money."*

[29] Breckenridge, "Make America Great Again (MAGA): The Covert Call for Colonialism's Comeback."
[30] Paul K. MacDonald, "America First? Explaining Continuity and Change in Trump's Foreign Policy," *Political Science Quarterly* 133, no. 3 (2018): 401–34, https://doi.org/10.1002/polq.12804.

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Trump also emphasized the need for a stronger military, pledging to be tougher on the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) than any previous leader. On immigration, he took a hardline stance, arguing that it had increased crime and reduced job opportunities. Famously, he claimed, *"When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best... They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists."* [31] He promised to build a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border, portraying it as essential to protecting American security and restoring its lost greatness. The message was clear: Trump alone had the vision and strength to "Make America Great Again."

As the campaign progressed, Trump expanded his focus on restoring America's global prestige. In a 2016 interview with Washington Post journalists Bob Woodward and Robert Costa, he underscored the need to regain the respect the United States had lost on the world stage. *"There is a tremendous lack of respect for our country,"* Trump stated, adding, *"People have respected me. My life has been a life where I've been respected. I want them to respect our country. I want them to respect our leader."* [32] For Trump, his personal success and the respect he commanded were central to his argument that he was uniquely qualified to restore America's international standing.

This vision culminated in his inauguration on January 20, 2017, where Trump delivered a fiery, nationalist speech that reinforced his populist message.[33] He painted a grim picture of the nation's state, describing *"American carnage"*—a decaying infrastructure, lost jobs, and a weakened military. Spector (2019) noted that Trump's portrayal of crisis, symbolized by 'American carnage,' served to position himself as the sole solution to these challenges. Many seemed ready to embrace this narrative.[34] Trump promised to return power to the people by confronting the Washington elite, revitalizing manufacturing, and bolstering the military. He reached out directly to Americans, emphasizing unity and shared purpose:

> *"We are one nation – and their pain is our pain. Their dreams are our dreams; and their success will be our success. We share one heart, one home, and one glorious destiny."* [35]

Trump promised to end years of foreign entanglements that had come at the expense of domestic renewal. He proclaimed, *"From this day forward, it's going to be only America first. America first."* [36] He criticized the country for defending foreign borders while allowing its own to weaken, stating, *"We've defended other nation's borders while refusing to defend our own. We've spent trillions of dollars overseas while America's infrastructure has fallen into disrepair."* [37] Reflecting on the economic losses of past decades, Trump lamented, *"We've made other countries rich while the wealth, strength, and confidence of our country has disappeared over the horizon. One by one, the factories shuttered and left our shores, with not even a thought about the millions upon millions of American workers left behind."* [38]

But he assured the country that these challenges were behind them, declaring, *"But that is the past. And now we are looking only to the future."* [39] Trump's speech culminated with his iconic pledge for national revival and a brighter future: *"Together, we will make America strong again. We will make*

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[31] McMillan, "MakeAmericaGreatAgain: Ideological Fantasy, American Exceptionalism and Donald Trump."
[32] Reinhard Wolf, "'Make America Great Again' Donald Trump's Mission to Restore Respect for America," no. March (2017): 1–25.
[33] "The Inaugural Address."
[34] Tourish, "It Is Time to Use the F Word about Trump: Fascism, Populism and the Rebirth of History."
[35] "The Inaugural Address."
[36] "The Inaugural Address."
[37] "The Inaugural Address."
[38] "The Inaugural Address."
[39] "The Inaugural Address."

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America wealthy again. We will make America proud again. We will make America safe again. And, yes, together, we will make America great again.''[40] His vision struck a chord with many Americans who felt left behind by globalization and disillusioned with the political elite.

b. Objet petit a: Idealized America

Trump's message was built on the fantasy of a lost American identity, threatened by immigrants and globalist policies, but capable of being restored under his leadership.[41] His rallying cry to "Make America Great Again" can be viewed as a response to an identity crisis, where many Americans believed the nation's global standing and prestige had eroded. Trump framed this crisis as one that could be reversed, positioning himself as the strong leader who would reclaim America's greatness by reinforcing borders, prioritizing domestic interests, and challenging international norms that had supposedly weakened the country.

Aligned with his vision, Trump's foreign policy rejected globalists ideology and interventionists ideology, attributing them to America's economic decline. He pledged to renegotiate trade agreements and leverage America's market power, even threatening trade restrictions. For Mexico and China specifically, he proposed tariffs of 20% and 45%, respectively, if these trade partners did not respond "appropriately."[42] He linked many of these issues back to the Clinton administration, criticizing it for adopting globalism, which he argued led to foreign policy failures favoring corporations over American workers.

In December 2015, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported a drop in the unemployment rate from 5.8 percent to 5.6 percent, a decrease of 0.2 percentage points (see figure 1).[43] However, Trump criticized this statistic, asserting that the real unemployment rate was much higher, estimating it to range from 18 to 19 percent, and possibly up to 21 percent. He argued that many Americans were unable to find jobs because these opportunities had been outsourced to countries like China and Mexico. This aligns with Scott's (2021) study, which shows that by 2015, manufacturing employment had fallen below 12 million workers. While manufacturing jobs remained stable above 16.5 million from 1970 to 1998, 5.7 million were lost between 1998 and 2013, with the hardest-hit states being North Carolina (9.7%, 360,000 jobs), Mississippi (8.5%, 95,600 jobs), Arkansas (8.1%, 89,900 jobs), Rhode Island (7.9%, 36,000 jobs), Michigan (7.6%, 340,000 jobs), Tennessee (7.3%, 191,700 jobs), Ohio (6.8%, 368,500 jobs), South Carolina (6.6%, 117,100 jobs), New Hampshire (6.6%, 38,700 jobs), and Alabama (6.1%, 114,600 jobs). Scott also noted that the main factors driving these losses were increasing trade deficits, particularly with China and Mexico, as well as the effects of the Great Recession and a weak recovery.[44]

Figure 2. Labor Force Participation Rate and Employment-population ratio and unemployment rate, January 2005 – December 2014

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[40] "The Inaugural Address."

[41] McMillan, "MakeAmericaGreatAgain: Ideological Fantasy, American Exceptionalism and Donald Trump."

[42] Joseph E. Stiglitz, "Trump and Globalization," *Journal of Policy Modeling* 40, no. 3 (2018): 515–28, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpolmod.2018.03.006.

[43] Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Unemployment Rate Declines 0.2 Percentage Point to 5.6 Percent in December 2014," The Economics Daily (U.S. Department of Labor, January 13, 2015), https://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2015/unemployment-rate-declines-in-december-2014.htm.

[44] Robert E Scott, "The Manufacturing Footprint and the Importance of U.S. Manufacturing Jobs," EPI Briefing Paper, 2015, http://www.epi.org/files/2015/bp388-manufacturing-footprint.pdf.

Labor force participation rate, employment–population ratio, and unemployment rate, seasonally adjusted, January 2005–December 2014
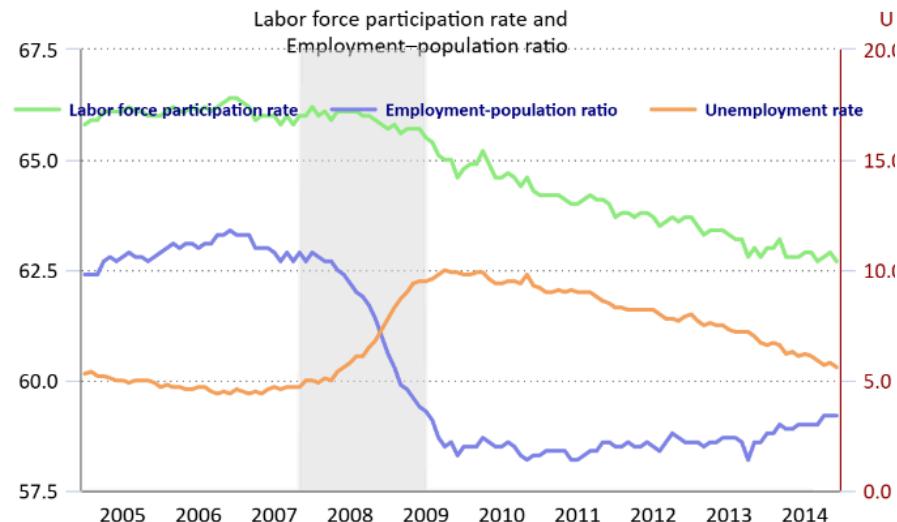
Source: United States Departement of Labor[45]

c. Jouissance: Emotional Satisfaction Through Symbolic Acts

In addition, Trump sharply criticized Obama's reliance on intergovernmental military alliances like The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), claiming it weakened U.S. sovereignty and left the nation dependent on other countries failing to meet their obligations, such as not contributing their fair share to defense. Trump viewed this loss of control as a source of chaos and claimed that prioritizing international interests over those of the U.S. had led to America's decline. Throughout the presidential campaign, Trump questioned NATO's relevance in the post-Cold War era, arguing that the U.S. was bearing an excessive share of Europe's security responsibilities.[46] He claimed NATO had become outdated, criticizing member countries for not contributing their fair share. Wary of binding international agreements, he stated, "*We will never enter America into any agreement that reduces our ability to control our own affairs.*" Trump pledged to restore stability by prioritizing American interests and regaining control over the nation's future.[47]

Building on this rhetoric, Trump's approach to foreign policy often drew on iconic American symbols of strength and toughness. He positioned himself as a modern-day Rambo, the hyper-masculine Vietnam veteran from Rambo: First Blood Part II (1985), who sought to restore American honor after national humiliation. Just as Rambo sought to settle old scores, Trump aimed to reassert U.S. power on the global stage. This comparison resonated with his supporters, who saw him

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[45] Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Unemployment Rate Declines 0.2 Percentage Point to 5.6 Percent in December 2014."

[46] Joyce P. Kaufman, "The US Perspective on NATO under Trump: Lessons of the Past and Prospects for the Future," *International Affairs* 93, no. 2 (2017): 251–66, https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iix009.

[47] Jason A. Edwards, "Make America Great Again: Donald Trump and Redefining the U.S. Role in the World," *Communication Quarterly* 66, no. 2 (2018): 176–95, https://doi.org/10.1080/01463373.2018.1438485; Rifat Darina Kamal and Z. R.M.Abdullah Kaiser, "Trump and the Ascension of Western Realism: A Critical Discussion on the Western Realists' and Western Liberalists' Evaluation of Globalisation," *India Quarterly* 74, no. 3 (2018): 257–71, https://doi.org/10.1177/0974928418785433.

as more than just a politician but as a savior of America's lost glory. A 2017 Pew survey indicated that 53% of White evangelical Protestants and 32% of Republicans believed that *"God chose Trump to become president because He approves of Trump's policies,"* compared to only 18% of White Catholics and 17% of Democrats. To maintain this perception, Trump needed to present himself—and be seen—as a destined savior.[48]

This image was reinforced in January 2020, after the assassination of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani. Trump issued a strong warning to Iran, threatening to target fifty-two sites, including cultural locations, if they retaliated. This assertive and retaliatory approach bolstered Trump's image as a protector of American pride and power, appealing to those who saw him as the leader who could restore the nation's global stature.[49]

d. Big Other: Symbolic Authority

Building on Lacan's theory, Trump's narrative gains depth as he positions himself not merely as a leader but as a savior who can supposedly redeem America's fractured identity. Lacan's concept of the barred subject ($) , which posits that individuals are inherently incomplete and perpetually seeking wholeness, applies to the way Trump's campaign constructs a narrative of a "lost America" that can be restored. Trump depicts America as once great but now diminished, with this decline attributed to external pressures: immigrants, Muslims, globalists, foreign competitors, or groups deemed inconsistent with Trump's national vision. These groups, in Lacanian terms, represent the "Other", the entities against which the subject (or, in this case, America) defines itself in its search for completeness.

This construction of the *"Other"* allows Trump's followers to assign blame for complex social and economic shifts, offering them a simple solution: by eliminating these external threats, America can reclaim its former glory. The slogan *Make America Great Again* taps into this idealized past, resonating with voters who feel disillusioned by globalization and cultural changes.

According to Pew Research Center (2013), for the first time in nearly 40 years of surveys, a majority (53%) believed that the U.S. played a less important and powerful role as a global leader compared to a decade earlier.[50] A 2014 Pew Research survey found that only 28% of Americans believed the U.S. was superior to all other nations, while most (58%) saw it as *"one of the greatest countries in the world, alongside others."*[51] Similarly, Anna Maria C. Behler et al. (2021) indicated that individuals nostalgic for America's past and displaying higher levels of prejudice were more inclined to support Trump's campaign, particularly the MAGA movement.[52] This approach aligns with Lacan's concept of fantasy as a structure that shapes desire around an unattainable ideal, represented by the *"objet petit a."*

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[48] Ivan Light, "Trump's Charisma," *Critical Sociology* 49, no. 3 (2023): 529–44, https://doi.org/10.1177/08969205221087425.

[49] Bonnie Honig, *Shell-Shocked: Feminist Criticism after Trump* (Fordham University Press, 2021).

[50] "Public Sees U.S. Power Declining as Support for Global Engagement Slips America's Place in the World 2013" (Pew Research Center, December 3, 2013), https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2013/12/03/public-sees-u-s-power-declining-as-support-for-global-engagement-slips/.

[51] Alec Tyson, "Most Americans Think the U.S. Is Great, but Fewer Say It's the Greatest" (Pew Research Center, July 2, 2014), https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2014/07/02/most-americans-think-the-u-s-is-great-but-fewer-say-its-the-greatest/.

[52] Anna Maria C Behler et al., "Making America Great Again ? National Nostalgia's Effect on Outgroup Perceptions," *Front. Psychol* 12, no. April (2021), https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.555667.

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e. Fantasy: MAGA as a National Restoration Fantasy

Trump's vision of an idealized America resonates deeply with his supporters' emotions, aligning with Lacan's concept of *jouissance*, the complex pleasure derived from pursuing desires that remain just out of reach. Provocative actions like the 2020 killing of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani fostered a sense of retribution and strength that resonated with his base, although the effect was temporary. Pew polls revealed this divided response, with 48% supporting the strike and 54% expressing concerns about potential escalation with Iran. [53] This act provided symbolic triumphs but did not address deeper issues such as national security or diplomatic stability, reinforcing Trump's image as a strong leader.

According to Lacan's theory, desire revolves around an unattainable objective, which Trump leverages effectively. By framing threats such as immigrants, Muslims, global elites, and foreign adversaries, as continual obstacles, he keeps the vision of America's restoration enticing yet out of reach, maintaining his base's loyalty. His speeches and promises heighten the anticipation of a revived nation but stop short of fulfilment, sustaining a cycle of unfulfilled longing. The *jouissance* experienced by his supporters arises from the blend of emotional satisfaction and the absence of concrete outcomes, reinforcing Trump's influence through the perpetual pursuit of an ideal.

This dynamic is evident in a 2017 Pew Research Center survey showing that 81% of Republicans backed Trump's travel ban on majority-Muslim countries, viewing it as essential for national security and American identity. Additionally, 54% believed the policy was implemented effectively, and 50% thought it reduced terrorism threats. [54] However, these measures addressed surface-level concerns without resolving deeper issues. The travel ban had economic repercussions, impacting sectors like tourism, education, and skilled labor by restricting crucial contributions to technological and academic growth. It reinforced anti-immigrant stereotypes, heightened social divides, and marginalized communities, undermining social cohesion and stability.

The policy discouraged international students[55], particularly from Arabic-speaking countries, leading to a significant decline in enrolment. Bellmore and Nicole L. Hacker cited Patel (2018), noting a 15.5% drop in Saudi students, and Redden (2018), who reported significant visa reductions in 2016–2017 for countries under Executive Order No. 13769. Visa issuances dropped by over 50% for Iraq, Libya, Somalia, and Yemen, and nearly 50% for Sudan and Syria, damaging the U.S.'s reputation as a welcoming educational hub.[56] Additionally, international travel suffered, with a 6.5% decline in U.S. bookings in February 2017. The Global Business Travel Association reported nearly $200 million in business travel losses within a week of the January 27 order. Jonathan Grella of the U.S. Travel Association noted that, beyond the specific travel restrictions, widespread backlash against these executive orders deterred international visitors, exacerbating the economic impact.[57] The travel ban

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[53] "Majority of U.S. Public Says Trump's Approach on Iran Has Raised Chances of a Major Conflict" (Pew Research Center, January 15, 2020),
https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2020/01/15/majority-of-u-s-public-says-trumps-approach-on-iran-has-raised-chances-of-a-major-conflict/.
[54] "Views of Trump's Executive Order on Travel Restrictions" (Pew Research Center, February 16, 2017),
https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2017/02/16/2-views-of-trumps-executive-order-on-travel-restrictions/.
[55] Pacificah Moora Mariita, "Trump's Potential Reelection and the Fate of Immigrants," *International Journal of Language and Literary Studies* 6, no. 3 (2024); Eric Bellmore and Nicole L Hacker, "'The Trump Effect': How Does It Impact International Student Enrollment in U.S. Colleges?," *Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis* 10, no. 1 (2020),
https://doi.org/10.31274/jctp.11588.
[56] Bellmore and Hacker, "'The Trump Effect': How Does It Impact International Student Enrollment in U.S. Colleges?"
[57] David Schaper, "Trump Travel Ban Hits The Travel Industry," March 9, 2017,
https://www.npr.org/2017/03/09/519382871/trump-travel-ban-hits-the-travel-industry.

also led to a shortage of about 2 million working-age immigrants, including around 950,000 college-educated individuals, affecting the U.S. labor market and key industries like technology, where 37% of Silicon Valley's workforce is foreign-born. The policy impacted approximately 90,000 visa holders, including students, business travellers, and thousands of green card holders.[58]

Similarly, Trump's trade policies, which aimed to revive American manufacturing by terminating trade agreements he considered unfavourable, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), garnered significant public support by tapping into economic nationalism and pride. A Pew Research Center survey from May 2015 revealed that many Americans were sceptical about the benefits of free trade, with 46% believing that trade deals lowered wages and led to job losses. [59] Following Trump's election, there was widespread anticipation for positive changes in trade policy. Trump's trade strategies prioritized U.S. industries and workers. He withdrew from the Transpacific Partnership (TPP), replaced NAFTA with the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) to enhance American manufacturing and agriculture, and promoted the *"Buy American, Hire American"* policy. Notable achievements included agreements with Japan to lower tariffs on U.S. agricultural and digital products, a renegotiated trade deal with South Korea, and a Phase One agreement with China focused on protecting American intellectual property. Additionally, he secured tariff reductions with the European Union (EU), reformed the Universal Postal Union, and advocated for transparency and reform in the World Trade Organization (WTO). These policies aimed to bolster the U.S. economy and protect American jobs.[60] A Pew Research Center survey conducted in January 2019 with 1,505 American adults revealed that 51% had some level of confidence in Trump's ability to negotiate favorable trade deals, and 49% trusted his economic policies. Approximately 51% rated the national economic conditions as excellent or good, while 60% indicated that there were ample job opportunities in their local area—an increase from 50% in 2017.[61]

However, despite this initial support, the concrete benefits of these policies were limited. Six months later, in July 2019, a Pew Research Center survey found that only 44% of Americans believed Trump's policies had improved the U.S. economy.[62] The import tariffs introduced by the Trump administration had a negative impact on American businesses, particularly those in goods-producing sectors, and these effects had been felt as early as 2018. A survey by the National Association for Business Economics (NABE), conducted from April 1 to April 10, 2018, revealed that 75% of respondents from sectors such as agriculture, forestry, fishing, mining, construction, and manufacturing reported negative impacts from the tariffs. Among these respondents, 67% noted higher costs, 50% reported increased selling prices, and 42% experienced a decline in sales.[63]

From a Lacanian perspective, discursive practices such as the travel ban and trade policies can be seen as delivering *"jouissance"*, a form of immediate yet superficial satisfaction that appeals to emotional desires while neglecting deeper structural issues in both security and economic realms. This approach offers supporters short-term reassurance of feeling secure and economically "protected," but

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[58] Aimee Picchi, ""I Was Devastated": Trump Travel Ban's Financial Pains," February 1, 2017, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-immigration-ban-impact-financial-pain/.
[59] "Free Trade Agreements Seen as Good for U.S., But Concerns Persist" (Pew Research Center, May 27, 2015), https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2015/05/27/free-trade-agreements-seen-as-good-for-u-s-but-concerns-persist/.
[60] "Trump Administration Accomplishments" (The White House, January 2021), https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/trump-administration-accomplishments/.
[61] "Views of Trump" (Pew Research Center, January 18, 2019), https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/01/18/1-views-of-trump-2/.
[62] "Public's Views of Nation's Economy Remain Positive and Deeply Partisan" (Pew Research Center, July 25, 2019), https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2019/07/25/publics-views-of-nations-economy-remain-positive-and-deeply-partisan/.
[63] Apep Suhendar and Ahmad Buchori, "Survei: Perusahaan-Perusahaan AS Laporkan Dampak Negatif Dari Tarif" (ANTARA, April 30, 2019), https://www.antaranews.com/berita/850812/survei-perusahaan-perusahaan-as-laporkan-dampak-negatif-dari-tarif.

fails to address core issues like wage stagnation, job displacement, and the complexities of a global economy. Lacanian theory would suggest that this type of emotional satisfaction temporarily masks these deeper problems without providing substantial, long-term solutions.

Lacan's idea of the "*Big Other*," or the symbolic authority that defines what is desirable, further explains Trump's unique appeal. During his 2015 campaign, Trump positioned himself as the only figure capable of restoring America's lost greatness, portraying the nation as in decline and the American dream nearly extinguished. His promise was clear: under his leadership, America would be *"bigger, better, and stronger than ever."* Emphasizing his resilience and past achievements, Trump framed himself as uniquely prepared to face external threats and rejuvenate the nation. He embodied core American ideals such as patriotism, self-reliance, and economic power, positioning himself not just as a leader but as a symbol of an idealized, bygone order, capable of restoring "law and order" and the supremacy of core values.

Trump's narrative also fostered clear antagonisms, targeting perceived adversaries like immigrants, global elites and foreign competitors, which bolstered his image as a savior. Supporters viewed him as the one capable of defending against these threats and restoring security and national pride. This savior role reinforced his appeal, offering a promise to reclaim a symbolic order and a national identity seen as eroded. Leveraging the rhetoric of rescue and opposition, Trump built political authority and fostered an emotional bond with his followers, who saw him as the only hope to halt decline and revive American greatness. For instance, a Pew Research Center survey in June 2016 indicated that voters prioritized the economy (84%), terrorism (80%), and foreign policy (75%). Though only 36% trusted Trump's foreign policy expertise, he was still seen as more capable than Hillary Clinton in addressing terrorism (48%) and immigration (42%),[64] bolstering his narrative of restoring security and national identity.

Once in office, Trump's image as a decisive leader solidified. A February 2017 Gallup poll revealed that 56% of Americans believed he could enact needed change, with 94% of Republicans supporting this view.[65] This perception of Trump as a hyper-masculine, tough leader, reminiscent of the Rambo figure, appealed to a desire for a forceful figure who could reverse perceived decline and restore national honor. In Lacanian terms, this fantasy of revival serves as a shield against the "Real", the unsettling, complex realities of life that resist symbolic resolution. Trump's narrative simplified multifaceted issues like globalization and social change, directing his followers' focus to external threats and internal failings, maintaining the belief that America's decline can be easily reversed.

Trump's MAGA campaign can be seen as a fantasy constructed to address an identity crisis, providing an idealized vision of national greatness. This fantasy fuels his supporters' desire for a renewed sense of identity, with Trump as the figure who can satisfy that longing. However, in Lacanian terms, the fantasy itself remains unattainable—a projection of unresolved desires that cannot be fully fulfilled. Trump's promise of national revival thus allows his supporters to navigate their identity crisis by shifting the complexities of globalization and societal change onto the figure of an idealized leader, giving them temporary respite from confronting the deeper, unresolved issues of contemporary life.

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[64] "Top Voting Issues in 2016 Election" (Pew Research Center, July 7, 2016), https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2016/07/07/4-top-voting-issues-in-2016-election/.

[65] Frank Newport, "Americans Say Trump Keeps Promises, Is Strong Leader" (Gallup, February 13, 2017), https://news.gallup.com/poll/203915/americans-say-trump-keeps-promises-strong-leader.aspx?g_source=Politics&g_medium=newsfeed&g_campaign=tiles.

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Conclusion

This analysis of the "Make America Great Again" movement shows that Trump's populist appeal is deeply tied to psychological needs for identity, belonging, and control. By framing America's supposed decline as the result of external threats—such as immigrants, Muslims, elites, and foreign powers, Trump creates a simplified narrative that channels public fears and positions himself as a symbolic "Big Other." Using Lacanian psychoanalysis, this narrative resonates by providing an illusion of control over complex societal issues, sustaining a continuous cycle of unmet desire. Actions like immigration restrictions and trade tariffs offer brief satisfaction but delay the fulfillment of the larger promise of a "restored America," thus reinforcing loyalty and maintaining hope among his supporters.

The article highlights that the endurance of political fantasies like MAGA is not solely due to their overt promises but stems from their ability to tap into deep psychological needs within the collective consciousness. This is further exemplified by Trump's rhetoric, which appeals to his supporters' feelings of insecurity and perceived loss, positioning him as the figure who can restore order and strength. The unwavering loyalty of his base, despite the cycle of unfulfilled promises, underscores how these psychological drivers extend beyond political messaging to touch on more profound emotional and existential levels.

For policymakers, this research underscores the importance of understanding the emotional and psychological drivers of populist support. Trump's narrative appeals to desires for wholeness and control, reinforcing his supporters' investment by directing blame at external sources. Insights from this analysis can guide the creation of inclusive policies that address such concerns constructively, avoid divisive rhetoric, and foster unity. By channeling public anxieties toward shared goals, leaders can build social cohesion instead of polarization. While Lacanian psychoanalysis is valuable, it may not fully capture broader socio-political factors behind populist support. Future research should explore emotional appeals across different contexts, combining psychoanalytic insights with empirical data to inform policy that meets psychological needs and promotes unity through constructive engagement.

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