



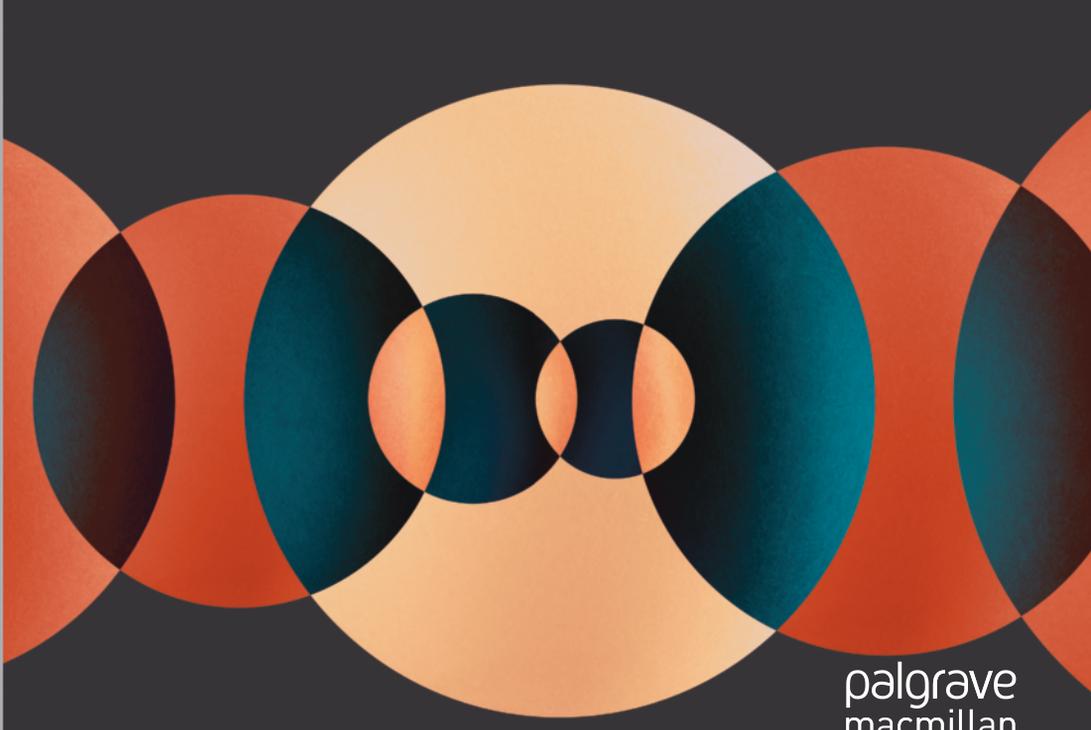
THE SCIENCES PO SERIES IN  
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND  
POLITICAL ECONOMY

# The Politics of Destruction

Three Contemporary Configurations of  
Hallucination: USSR, Polish PiS Party,  
Islamic State

François Bifoil

*Translated by* Laurie Hurwitz



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# Psychoanalysis and History: The Unconscious and Reason

**Abstract** This chapter examines three configurations of hallucination through their similarities and differences. Similarities relate to the psychoanalytical approach—with the notion of the unconscious at its core—of repetition and destruction, through which I examine the processes of construction of a hallucinated surreality in each case. Repetition is felt as a vital constraint and as such is akin to a compulsion founded on inexhaustible anxiety (because constantly fueled). This anxiety is triggered by the constant threat of disappearance and death by a malevolent force, of enemies obsessed with annihilation. Differences relate to History perceived in light of the double aspect of the Western reason, when it defines it first as the negative side of that of which reason would be the positive, in the fullness of discourse, science and art; and as the Other of Reason—reason being understood as “common sense” from which this Other would be substantively different.

**Keywords** Psychoanalysis · Repetition · Destruction · Time and space · Hallucination · Unconscious · Reason · Hallucinated reality · The other · Common sense

By focusing on certain personality types in “totalitarian” thinking—those from the Bolshevik regime and the Islamic State—and in a derivative of it,

the “authoritarian” thinking identified with the Polish ruling party, Law and Justice (PiS)<sup>1</sup>—this essay seeks to better understand that which corresponds to the notion of “hallucination” in relation to politics or even, to borrow the term Freud used in reference to dreams, “wish fulfillment.” If perception refers to an existing external object and is its mnemonic trace, hallucination differs from this in that it pertains to the mnemonic trace of a lacking object to which it gives form and content by recomposing them. It distinguishes itself all the more in that it is attached to an indefectible belief in its reality by those who are experiencing the hallucination, and who use all the means at their disposal to impose it on others as an inescapable reality. The dimension of this belief, and still more a profound conviction, leads to obsession and fixation. It forces the act of repetition and reinforces this deep conviction that the hallucination is a clear and unavoidable reality. What separates a psychiatric approach to hallucination from a political approach, which I explore here, is the emphasis on violence against those in political power, intended to impose this deep conviction on others and to prohibit any change that could possibly lead to another lived reality.

It is this form and content that need to be analyzed, as do the political means carried out to impose it on citizens in place of reality, either collective or individual. To do so, I will try to understand the desire that animates political thought and action when this desire pertains to an obsession with purity and authorizes certain individuals to unleash a terrifying wave of violence. What is particularly striking, of course, is this violence seen as a sign of ancestral barbarity. But it is equally the chasm the violence implies, that of the unbearable lack felt by the perpetrators of this violence, a lack in which they damage themselves as if to better pull themselves out of the chasm. With this extreme violence, they suggest that the lacking object at the root of their anxiety—which can be a social class they consider rotten, an untenable distortion of religion, or even an unacceptable perversion of history—must be eliminated in the most radical way possible and replaced by an idealized reality: a single and unique social class; the originary religion; sacred history.

But purity of intention is not only seen in the goal they want to achieve. It is also revealed by way of their compulsive need to purge everything that may have preceded them and everything around them.

<sup>1</sup> Prawo i Sprawiedliwosc (PiS).

Militants must embody the purity in which they project themselves, and whose image is none other than themselves—in other words, an ego that seeks itself and itself alone in its admired and loved ideal, trapped in self-love, in narcissism. For these kinds of individuals, the only thing that seems capable of alleviating the anxiety of this lack is the advent of a future conceived as a victory over history, a history reduced to something degrading and evil. And for this reason, what they seek is imagined either as a totally blissful future or as a return to an immaculate origin. In both cases, a process of repetition, both psychological and practical, inevitably imposes itself: repetition of a destructive action accomplished without weakness, repetition of rites that sanctify action and speech, and, lastly, repetition of origin as a new beginning, devoid of the seeds of any possible degeneration that history might have engendered.

In this first chapter, I will specify the two theoretical dimensions that allow us to apprehend our three configurations in terms of their similarities and differences. The similarities relate to the psychoanalytical approach, with the notion of the unconscious at its core, through which we intend to understand the processes of construction of a hallucinated surreality in each case. The differences relate to the history perceived in light of Western reason insofar as each case is situated in relation to it and is therefore different from the other cases. The three chapters dealing with Soviet totalitarianism (Chapter 2), the authoritarianism of the ruling Polish party, the Law and Justice Party, the PiS (Chapter 3), and jihadist extremism (Chapter 4) will allow us to consider in a final development the links between psychoanalysis and political science by returning to the dynamics of negation, repetition, and repression specific to the unconscious, and comparing them with the categories of domination identified by Max Weber of tradition, charisma, and the legal-rational order.

## 1 THE UNCONSCIOUS AND POLITICS

The different processes of feeling unbearable anxiety and its repression reveal what underlies them in conflictual and perpetual tension—the unconscious. This notion of the unconscious is central to my thinking, because it justifies applying psychoanalytic tools to subjects traditionally pertaining to political science. This notion of the unconscious cannot be taken as a given, and even less as something that would “elude” totalitarian psychology—a term I will return to and clarify later—and that might be revealed through analyzing discourses, texts, and practices. It

is therefore not comparable to *lapsus linguae* or an *acte manqué*, even if it is understood that Freud infers the unconscious by analyzing these phenomena.<sup>2</sup> On the contrary, it is a question of understanding the unconscious as the elemental structure which, like the dream, involves the processes of selection, repression, and denial through the dynamics of love and hate, by assigning social actors their place in the social space and in history. In this way, policies of inclusion are based on the identification of “friend” groups, and policies of exclusion on that of “enemy” groups.

### 1.1 *The Construction of the Surreality*

I return briefly here to the structure of dreams in order to understand how Freudian concepts can be mobilized in analyzing “totalitarian psychology” and its avatar, “authoritarian thought,” which will allow me to compare them in the book’s conclusion with the types of political authority identified by Max Weber.<sup>3</sup> From the dream, which remains the entryway *par excellence* to the unconscious, let us keep in mind the two levels whose components and interactions provide a first approach to the subject of this essay. The first is referred to as “manifest” and the second, “latent.” “Manifest” content is exposed in its raw materiality, in the way that it is directly told and listened to during narration. “Latent” content translates desire by reshaping it in a variety of forms that define the dreamers’ wished-for goal and the means used to attain it. These different processes of combination are important here because they are analogous to those of the displacement of dream content, its reconstitution, its caesura, and ultimately the substitution of one element for

<sup>2</sup> “The oldest and best meaning of the word ‘unconscious’ is the descriptive one; we call a psychical process unconscious whose existence we are obliged to assume—for some such reason as that we infer it from its effects—but of which we know nothing.” Sigmund Freud, “The Dissection of the Psychical Personality,” *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, Lecture 31, *Complete Works*, Vol. XXII (1932–1936) (London: Hogarth Press, 1995), 70.

<sup>3</sup> For this reason, this essay further develops the ideas presented in my book from 2019, a comparative study of the work of Freud and Weber on epistemology, crowd psychology and war, and on Judaism and antisemitism: François Bafail, *Freud et Weber. L’Hérédité, Race, Masse et Traditions* (Paris: Hermann, 2019). In contrast, here I do not compare their two ways of thinking but rather focus on a heuristic approach to Freudian concepts as a way of understanding specific political regimes. For this reason, in Chapter 5, I seek in a final comparison to show how the definition of Weberian types of domination can be enriched by referring to certain Freudian concepts.

another. Moreover, they have their place in a configuration in which the links of consequentiality are eliminated, temporality is absent, and spatial distinctions are nullified. Negation of temporality and distance, thus negation of coordination and causality—such are the structuring operations by which the unconscious acts on factual content, transforms it, denies it and reproduces it in another form, one that conforms more closely to the dreamers' desires.<sup>4</sup> For this reason, that which occurs in dreams has much in common with a hallucination, a hallucination that is all the stronger because dreamers believe they are omnipotent, free to manipulate all the components of reality as they wish and fully satisfied with their performance. In this respect, waking up, as well as the return to reality it implies, is always an ordeal for the person forced to interrupt the pleasure of remaining asleep in full omnipotence. The dreamer is once again subject to the strict conditions of the passage of time and spatial distance, which imply not only the awareness of others but also of the objections they may raise, or even the impossibility of reaching one's goal immediately, without having to pass through consecutive steps in the process. In short, becoming conscious of one's finiteness, which is limited by the Other. Reality, as it were.

Let me pause here to explain that these dynamics allow an understanding of the principal orientations that lay the foundations of "totalitarian psychology" as analyzed here. They can be divided into three sequences: the destruction of the frameworks of understanding, the fantasmaticization of reality into "surreality," and the selection of individuals and their assignation in the social space according to determinations of love and hate.

The first part deals with the politics of destruction of categories of understanding. These are categories of time and space, which are as valid for the community as for the individual, and which, as we have known since Kant, constitute conditions of possibility for action. For this reason, they participate in defining the ego. Whether individual or collective, the ego is built through the practical implementation of these categories, because they allow it to place itself in relation to beings and things, to

<sup>4</sup> "To sum up: *exemption from mutual contradiction, primary process* (mobility of cathexes), *timelessness* and *replacement of external by psychical reality* – these are the characteristics which we may expect to find in processes belonging to the system *Ucs.*" Sigmund Freud, "The Unconscious," *Complete Works, Vol. XIV (1914–1916)* (London: Hogarth Press, 1995), 167.

collective history and individual experience. But all regimes, totalitarian or authoritarian—and this is my premise—begin by destroying that which contributes to defining the ego, and thus these regimes are focused on reformulating the frameworks and references of collective history. Authoritarian psychology does this at best, by drawing attention to certain heroic configurations in collective history and in textbooks and by denigrating all opposition forces qualified as “the enemy,” and totalitarian psychology does this at worst, by eliminating all objectors stigmatized as “traitors” and condemned to death. This recasting of collective references obliges individuals to pledge allegiance to a new representation of shared history; for otherwise they run the risk of suffering the same fate of those denounced as the “others,” the “them,” all those who are destined to die. These “others” take on the identity of the hated Other, determined to destroy the beloved ego. This first step toward destruction seems to correspond to that which René Kaës referred to when he spoke of “catastrophe” as the moment when the structuring components of social space break down—the moment when the sublimation of drives, taboos, and collective representations no longer fulfill their regulatory and protective function.<sup>5</sup> This leaves the way open to violence unleashed across the board. A “catastrophe” that is not representable, because the dynamic of violence that strikes it is so significant. A catastrophe that opens, to refer to the terminology used by César and Sara Botella, onto trauma: trauma that “should be understood as a negativity—that is to say, a violent and abrupt absence of topographies and psychical dynamics, the rupture of psychic coherence and the collapse of primary and secondary processes.”<sup>6</sup>

From this first process, which destroys the frameworks of thought and action, there results a substitution of surreality for lived experience. In the case of totalitarianism, this surreality aspires to reality in its entirety, and in the case of authoritarianism, it is equivalent to a fantastical representation of history, one that legitimizes the action taken in reference to it. This is accompanied by a dream vision of social unity, as well as a process

<sup>5</sup> René Kaës, “Ruptures catastrophiques et travail de la mémoire,” in J. Puget, ed., *Violence d’État et psychanalyse* (Paris: Dunod, 1985), 169–204.

<sup>6</sup> César Botella and Sara Botella presented their work on trauma in a conference held by the Société psychanalytique de Paris at UNESCO, January 14–15, 1989. See César Botella and Sara Botella, “The hallucinatory,” in *The Work of Psychic Figurability, Mental States Without Representation*, translated by A. Weller (Hove and New York: Brunner-Routledge, The New Library of Psychoanalysis, 2005), 114.

of denial that leads to selecting social groups or historical representations that deserve to be accepted or, conversely, must be rejected. As mentioned above, confusion and the combination of the different “components” of this representation, as well as their selection and their recomposition, constitute the basis for the functioning of the dream. This process claims to tell the truth about past history in order to better denounce that which resembles a lie, to make sure its own vision of history is accepted. As such, it proceeds by total or partial negation, by bringing together facts that are very distant in time or space, by disavowing consequences or by concatenating data that are disconnected from one another. By denying alterity or creating artificial proximities, these policies all pursue the same goal: to achieve a unique vision of their action or a specific, exclusive form of domination. This operation is based on the distinction between “good” and “bad” members of society, in other words between those who should be saved because they correspond to what is “acceptable”—the group of friends and allies—as opposed to those who must be eliminated, excluded, or even disposed of—the enemy group, “unacceptable.”

First introduced with the destruction of categories of collective time and space, then pursued with the substitution and imposition of surreality, the totalitarian (or authoritarian) process leads ultimately to social distinctions that divide the “us” identical to the ego from the “them” identified with the other. The resulting process of symbolization articulates what is acceptable in the social sphere and obliterates what is not, condemning it to nonexistence. All of this is bolstered by the development of a vast panoply of language overflowing with terms that are meant to be as close as possible to the love of their brothers and those who are chosen, or that are meant to be heard as a logorrhea of hate in order to belittle the other to the lowest level of life—the germ, the cockroach, waste. Such a dynamic thus establishes a regime of exceptionality. What is exceptional deserves to be kept or, in other words, absorbed; conversely, what is insignificant must be discarded or ejected. The action proceeds from the same mechanism as the unconscious when it chooses what deserves to be recognized and what should be forever eliminated, relegated to the non-conscious. Repression is a fundamental aspect of my argument, as is the “negation-repetition” that accompanies it.

## 1.2 *Negation and Repetition*

Freud interprets repression as a defense mechanism that counters an experience one feels is inadmissible—an unacceptable thought, an unbearable sensation or image—and underlying it, a shameful desire. Many psychoanalysts have explored the notion of primary defense mechanisms<sup>7</sup> to indicate that the subsequent mechanisms of denial (*die Verleugnung*), foreclosure (*die Verwerfung*), and negation (*die Verneinung*) stem from this notion. These are many facets of “the work of the negative,” understood as a drive that tirelessly seeks to destroy whatever stands in its way. Denial, as shown, makes it possible to select what is admissible and what is not. Foreclosure defines the space for thought and “good” action, that is, according to norms, while negation consists of refusing factual evidence in order to replace it with another reality, one that conforms more closely to desire.

As such, any reflection on social and political pathology seems from the outset to be connected to lack, and therefore to the negative. The symbolic of repetition reinforces this idea, which can be understood in relation to the feeling of intolerable lack that is translated into anxiety. This lack leads to a sought-after purity in totalitarian action and its opposite, vice or impurity, which its perpetrators believe have taken over history. For this reason, the lacking object leads to repression. But the pressure it exerts is reflected in the displacement of the psychological weight that, disguised and reformulated in a way that is acceptable to the individual—the symptom—can then return, prettified and recast. In this way, it ensures its control over the ego.<sup>8</sup> In politics, this is the reference object, promoted to the extreme. It could be the sovereign nation, the class that is finally dominant, or even pure origin free of all corruption. Repetition is thus presentification by way of displacement of the lacking object, thus conquering the fatal absence. Children, as Freud explains, respond to this when, in order to dominate the overwhelming anxiety that arises from the lack resulting from the separation with the mother, they

<sup>7</sup> André Green, *The Work of the Negative*, translation A. Weller (London: Free Association Books, 1999), in particular his chapter “Traces of the Negative in Freud’s Work.” 50–81.

<sup>8</sup> Freud makes this clear in his analysis of the obsessional neurosis, which he relates to repetition compulsion in order to compare it to religious ceremonial. Sigmund Freud, “Obsessive Acts and Religious Practices,” *Complete Works, Vol. IX (1906–1908)* (London: Hogarth Press, 1995), 135–146.