

Filip Pierzchalski 

University of Warsaw

f.pierzchalski@uw.edu.pl

Mark J. Kaswan 

University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

mark.kaswan@utrgv.edu

## ‘DIRTY’ RIGHT-WING POPULIST LEADER

### Between Moral Relativism and Cynical Practices of Leadership Authority<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT:** The aim of this article is to try to explain the phenomenon of dirty hands in political leadership as a manifestation of anti-political practices of gaining and maintaining political authority, especially Donald Trump’s leadership phenomenon. The starting point for discussing the phenomenon of ‘dirty’ leadership will be ethical relativism, which can be interpreted not only as a practical denial of the idea of axiological absolutism in politics (a state of diversity regarding moral attitudes among political actors), but also as a manifestation of cynical behavior of a political leader. The phenomenon of the ‘dirty’ leader not only challenges our ideas about ethics and leadership, it also reveals certain weaknesses of elite-driven liberal democracy, which illiberal elites around the world have used to their advantage and reflects a kind of anti-political politics associated with authoritarianism.

**Keywords:** political leadership, dirty hands, populism, Donald Trump, moral relativism

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## INTRODUCTION

In thinking, attitudes and behavior of populist leaders<sup>2</sup> one can observe a gradual selectivity regarding specific ways of acting or assessing, which begins or ends with the statement 'so what'. We are talking here about situations in politics, where leaders are not only inconsistent in their opinions or decisions, but can even publicly contradict themselves or deliberately abandon their own declarations, plans, goals or strategies. This is accompanied by the 'so what if you caught me' rhetoric, 'you won't do anything to me – you will quickly forget', 'so what if I lie'; 'Lying is an integral part of the world of politics'. These are leadership practices in which mechanisms of self-negation or public renunciation by the leader of the previously declared community of values with followers are visible, including denial of the interests of one's own political party, political program or election promises to the electorate. At the same time, we are dealing here with an ostentatious and, in extreme cases provocative, questioning of the applicable party rules and, more broadly, norms, values and principles in the social dimension. In a broader sense, the political culture practiced by a populist leader, with which he once agreed and supported, and perhaps even identified to some extent, in the face of the functioning of the logic 'so what' ceases to apply. It is temporarily suspended – and in fact replaced by current calculation, sophistication, opportunism or moral ambivalence.

In such circumstances, it seems reasonable to analyze not so much the pattern of 'so what' behavior, but rather the phenomenon of ethical ambition of populist leaders. It means an open, public and observable manifestation of contradictions in aspirations (simultaneous occurrence of contradictory aspirations), when the leader treats these contradictions as a method of effective action in the public sphere and an effective means of achieving the intended goals; when the leader's cognitive dissonance – inconsistencies between what he says and what he does – from the level of ethical reflection becomes a sign of political cunning, cynicism, even rudeness and boorishness. Using the arguments of the Italian philosopher Niccolò Machiavelli, it is refined rulers and/or self-centered political elites who, through the daily game of appearances, practicing lies, plotting intrigues and freely using manipulative tactics, are not only able to come to power, but also effectively maintain it and reproduce in given political conditions. In other words, they are leaders who think about politics and act in inter-subjective interaction and exchange in the public sphere, guided by the practical principle that bad behavior, 'dirty' games, 'immoral' competitive strategies, conscious lying, etc. can

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<sup>2</sup> For more on the category 'populist leader', especially 'right-wing populist leader', see C. Mudde, C.R. Kaltwasser (eds), *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?*, Cambridge 2012; C. Mudde (ed.), *The Populist Radical Right. A Reader*, London–New York 2017; R. Eatwell, M. Goodwin, *National Populism. The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy*, London 2018; P. Norris, R. Inglehart, *Cultural Backlash. Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism*, Cambridge 2019; E. Traverso, *The New Faces of Fascism. Populism and the Far Right*, London 2019; G. Fitzzi, J. Mackert, B. S. Turner, *Populism and the Crisis of Democracy*, vol. 1: *Concepts and Theory*, London–New York 2019.

be – and often are – a real, and in extreme cases the only, source of effective and successful leadership.

The aim of this article is to try to explain the phenomenon of dirty hands in political leadership as a manifestation of anti-political practices of gaining and maintaining political authority, especially Donald Trump's leadership phenomenon. The starting point for discussing the phenomenon of 'dirty' leadership will be ethical relativism, which can be interpreted not only as a practical denial of the idea of axiological absolutism in politics, which means a state of diversity regarding moral attitudes among political actors, but also as a manifestation of pragmatism in the behavior of political leader. We are talking here about practical leadership cynicism, in which the axiological indeterminacy and gradual ethical relativity of the leader are not only synonymous with the lack of his own moral concept or the disappearance of his actual ideology, but also become the key principle of *ad hoc* solutions and political interests. At the same time, in this article, such ethical ambivalence will be a reason to consider political leadership as an inauthentic leadership formula in which the normative component is questioned or rejected. This is the moment of negating the symptoms of common ethical attitudes between the leader and his followers, where 'supra-individual normative bridges' are created on the basis of the professed set of values and ethical norms, which are the actual bond of leadership practices. It is questioning of the formation of moral bonds, which are the source of building interpersonal trust or ethically justified formulas of collective identity, similarly formed moral standards and points of view between the leader and followers.

Against this background, the authors will explain the philosophical problem of dirty hands, which in this article will be perceived as a justification for the leader's political lies, his deliberate cunning, methodical insidiousness, refined lust for power or various manipulation tactics and strategies created with his participation during the political leadership. On top of that, the mechanism of using cynical lies by Donald Trump as a source of his political accreditation and actual successes will be discussed. The basis for such behavior can be found in the ethical realism of Niccolò Machiavelli. Paradoxically, the ethical ambivalence of a leader, combined with methodical lying and moral indifference, does not bother them to achieve the intended political goals, it even results in political messianism or the thoughtless devotion of supporters. In this sense, the authority of politicians seems not to be based on an extraordinary personality and consistently followed moral principles, rooted in everyday actions and political choices, but rather is a media creation – an imaginary project or the result of audiovisual manipulation. It is an image of appearance and illusion, when the desired authority of the leader is nothing more than a manifestation of calculated calculation and highly suggestive political social engineering.

This article is intended to focus on right-wing populism,<sup>3</sup> but we must acknowledge that there are also left-wing populists, and we must have some basis for distinguishing

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<sup>3</sup> Among the many definitions of populism in contemporary analyses of leadership practices, we would like to emphasize the particular explanatory usefulness of the definition proposed by Kirk Hawkins. We assume, following Hawkins, that populism should be define *in terms of two political criteria: the*

between them. Dating from the classic division of the French Parlement into supporters of the continuation of the monarchy on the right and the advocates for a French Republic on the left, we can distinguish right-wing from left-wing populism by the former's dedication to the maintenance of social hierarchies. In the era of late-modern capitalism, this means limiting the reach of or access to democratic institutions and maintaining the power of capitalist elites, as well as, in most cases, military elites. Left-wing populists, on the other hand, seek to expand democratic practices to give more power to the people – especially for members of the poor and working classes who are typically excluded from politics – and use their power in order to counteract the exploitation of the working class and the destruction of the natural environment in the name of global capitalist interests. While both right-wing and left-wing populists share a tendency to stretch the truth, demonize their opponents, and take an 'ends justify the means' approach to politics, left-wing populists largely avoid the problem of 'dirty hands,' the ethical corruption and moral relativism of the right-wing populists. While the focus will be on right-wing populism, particularly as exemplified by the Trump phenomenon, we will also see how left-wing populism can turn into its mirror image, as in Venezuela and Nicaragua, as populist leaders seek to hold onto power by allying themselves with the very interests they rail against in their public statements.

## MORAL RELATIVISM AND DENIAL OF AUTHENTICITY

Let us recall that the starting point of the relativistic doctrine are two assumptions. First, that people's beliefs on the same issue may differ. Secondly, the occurrence of these beliefs in any given case depends on the circumstances and conditions in which their advocates find themselves.<sup>4</sup> Against this background, moral relativism is a position that highlights and postulates the subjective multiplicity of ethical points of view and their actual relativity. More importantly, these are situations in which fundamental differences among people regarding their values and principles are emphasized. They include, among others: cultural differences, based on specific moral systems, which become the actual source of these differences (diversity of cultural areas as a premise for ethical disputes).<sup>5</sup> In other words, relativistic positions deny the existence of a universal standard of moral values

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*presence of a charismatic mode of linkage between voters and politicians, and a democratic discourse that relies on the idea of a popular will and a struggle between 'the people' and 'the elite'.* K. Hawkins, "Populism in Venezuela. The Rise of Chavismo," *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 24 no. 6 (2003), pp. 1137-1160.

<sup>4</sup> M. Mandelbaum, "Subjective, Objective, and Conceptual Relativism," in J.W. Meiland, M. Krausz (eds), *Relativism. Cognitive and Moral*, Notre Dame–London 1982, pp. 45-47; W. Newton-Smith, "Relativism and Possibility of Interpretation," in M. Hollis, S. Lukes (eds), *Rationality and Relativism*, Cambridge 1982, pp. 106-122; H. Siegel, "Relativism," in I. Niiniluoto, M. Sintonen, J. Woleński (eds), *Handbook of Epistemology*, Dordrecht–Boston–London 2004, pp. 747-777.

<sup>5</sup> R. Brandt, "Ethical Relativism," in P.K. Moser, T.L. Carson (eds), *Moral Relativism. A Reader*, New York–Oxford 2001, pp. 25-31.

that are equally true and binding for all individuals. At the same time, they question the sense of functioning in societies of some supra-historical principle of moral obligation, which would be universally approved and sanctioned. In some sense, moral relativism is the antithesis of objectivism and moral absolutism. It corresponds to the subjectivist approach to explaining moral attitudes and actions, which emphasizes the inconsistency and diversity of moral beliefs among people. Therefore, not only individual people, but also groups and social classes become environments that generate or reproduce various opinions, views and moral standards; they may define good or perceive evil differently. It is also the moment when the position, achieved status or role and function in society have a significant impact on the moral attitudes and behaviors of individuals.<sup>6</sup> Relativistic positions claim that moral norms are not absolute, objective or timeless, but are relative because they depend directly and/or indirectly on the diverse contexts in which they arise and are temporarily binding (different determining factors, e.g. language, culture, historical conditions, etc.<sup>7</sup>). Therefore, the evaluation or assessment of people's moral judgments and beliefs cannot occur outside the context of their origin. Such judgments and beliefs are always 'of' and 'for' someone, resulting in a multiplicity of moral perspectives and pluralism in ethical assessments of given acts, behaviors, or political decisions. This is first-person reasoning about values and principles, where internal reasons, beliefs, and opinions are the source of human morality. For instance, using the arguments of Bernard Williams, the founder of motivational internalism in metaethics, one could say that the point is to emphasize the subjective motivational system<sup>8</sup> [in the formation of moral attitudes and behaviors. In other words, the existence of internal beliefs in a specific individual is the source of a certain disposition to do what they are right to do. Furthermore, for Williams, moral judgments are closely linked to human motivation.<sup>9</sup> The sources of morality should be sought in subjective desires and beliefs, not in abstractly understood moral obligations (external reasons) that function in a given society, i.e. 'beyond' people's individual desires.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> R.L. Arrington, *Rationalism, Realism, and Relativism. Perspectives in Contemporary Moral Epistemology*, Ithaca-London, 1989, pp. 192-199.

<sup>7</sup> It is worth recalling that Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes mention three areas of inspiration from which relativism draws: 1. Romanticism treated as an opposition to Enlightenment universalism (this trope can be found in F. Nietzsche, especially in the perception of truth as a 'mobile army of metaphors'); 2. De Mastre's conservative nominalism; Herder's historicism, and Hegel's philosophy of history. M. Hollis, S. Lukes, "Introduction," in M. Hollis, S. Lukes (eds), *Rationality and Relativism*, Cambridge 1982, pp. 2-5.

<sup>8</sup> For Bernard Williams, subjective motivational systems include not only desires, but also evaluative dispositions, emotional response patterns, personal commitments, and various other plans that embody what the subject is committed to. B. Williams, "Replies," in J.E. Altham, R. Harrison (eds), *Mind, World, and Ethics*, Cambridge 1995, pp. 185-224.

<sup>9</sup> B. Williams, "Internal and External Reasons," in *Moral Luck. Philosophical Papers 1973-1980*, Cambridge Cambridge 1981, p. 10.

<sup>10</sup> D. Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*, Cambridge 1989; S. Darwall, "Internalism and Agency," *Philosophical Perspectives*, vol. 6 (1992), pp. 155-174; F. Björklund, G. Björnsson, J. Eriksson et al., "Recent Work on Motivational Internalism," *Analysis*, vol. 72, no. 1 (2012), pp. 124-137.

In this sense, there is a certain convergence between ethical relativism and subjectivism, where the multiplicity, difference and non-translatibility of moral assessments or behaviors between people are clearly emphasized and accentuated. One should be aware that consistently understood ethical subjectivism in politics means the actual impossibility of achieving supra-individual consensus at the level of professed moral principles and values. Referring to the first-person ethical perspective ('ethical I') and its untranslatibility, potential conflict or incompatibility with other entities ('ethical You') is a practical paradox. This situation seems highly problematic, especially if we take into account the leadership process, which is realized in the existence of temporary inter-subject cooperation, intersubjective bonds, communities of interest, the state of homogeneity of motivation, group goals, etc. In all these cases, the moral plane may be – and often is – a key component around which collective political subjectivity is built. Otherwise, by developing and reproducing shared axiology, the leader is able to shape a certain degree of trust, political credibility, or achieve the intended level of social legitimacy among potential and actual supporters. It is worth adding that in the case of ethical relativism, we are dealing here with a conscious instrumentalization of the state of multiplicity and relativity of ethical attitudes in public space, when the leader treats politics as a relativized moral space, in which not only is the boundary between the categories of good/evil or truth/falsehood blurred, but it is difficult to speak the language of ethical obligations that would be acceptable to the majority of society members. More importantly, the leader treats this relativism as:

1. A potential stimulus and opportunity to initiate 'dirty' political activity – the state of relativity and multiplicity of ethical attitudes in the general social dimension is, on the one hand, a premise for creating socio-political divisions and ideological polarization, when the leader (broadly those in power) – based on ethical argumentation – is able to effectively shape antagonisms and differences between political actors, including future followers/ opponents (broadly governed). At the same time, a normatively relativized public space is an excellent starting point for stimulating or extinguishing various emotions and moods among society, which are closely related to the ethical narrative pushed by the leader. The leader either situationally – in close connection with current political practice – or long-term – based on a previously developed strategy of action – 'juggles morality' in communication and political activity. In this sense, they may be perceived by the audience, critics or opponents as hypocrites. For example, a leader who talks about transparency and honesty in public life but are themselves involved in cases of political corruption in his own party; he calls for legislative work in parliament on fair labor law that will minimize the exploitation of hired workers, and he himself is the owner of a company that illegally employs foreigners, etc. However, hypocrisy – as Mike W. Martin put it – is in this case an effective 'form of pretense'. Therefore, the politicians who are hypocrites are first of all *pretenders, who intend or willingly allow themselves to appear better than they are (whether better according to valid moral standards, unwarranted conventional moral standards, or other norms), and who are at fault for doing*

so.<sup>11</sup> In such circumstances, the state of relativity of moral principles allows the leader to develop formulas of leadership mystification through which they can deliberately lie or mislead public opinion. It may also refer to the diversity and instability of norms or ethical principles as an 'objective difficulty' in which the leadership process is implemented. However, this 'difficulty' is also an extremely attractive and lucrative 'chance' for him to achieve short-term benefits and political goals.

2. An effective formula for self-deception among followers – these are moments when the broadly understood audience does not want to acknowledge it (awareness) – even involuntarily represses or forgets – given facts, events or states of affairs resulting from the leader's perverse or deceitful political activity. This happens regardless of the fact that the audience knows or has knowledge about it. Otherwise, the plurality and ethical relativity in society (as an objective state of affairs) combined with the leader's *ad hoc* activity (the leader's subjective ethical ambivalence) become a premise for the gradual 'desensitization' of followers, their moral 'impregnation' to the leader's hypocrisy or cynicism. Ultimately, self-deception may release some irrational faith in the leader's leadership abilities, impeccability and 'impeccable' pseudo-morality among followers.<sup>12</sup> Even if they lie and manipulate, in the end they are our (implicitly honest and righteous) people; maybe they are hypocrites, but our opponents are bigger hypocrites; even if they are bad and play 'rough' and 'dirty', they play 'for us' and 'about us'. In this sense, populist leaders are able – and more importantly, manipulatively induce – in their leadership to activate, among others, such elements of self-deception as systemic ignorance or emotional detachment.<sup>13</sup> On the one hand, both processes not only enable followers to delay cognitive dissonance towards the leader; on the other, they are a catalyst for the leader's moral ambivalence and insidiousness in action, because he is aware of a certain inviolability of social trust or the 'resistance' of followers to unethical and/or 'dirty' leadership activity.

Let us clarify that from the point of view of leadership processes it is not only about the state of interpersonal disagreement about the values or moral judgments expressed, but rather about the phenomenon of moral indifference, when the political leader – as Ronald D. Milo rightly emphasized – is aware that what I do is wrong (or right), but it doesn't matter whether I do right or wrong.<sup>14</sup>

Moral indifference can be perceived as a specific relativistic formula, which does not so much emphasize subjective relativity regarding moral attitudes or behavior, but rather emphasizes the conscious normative indifference of individuals towards doing good and/or evil. It can be added that in such an attitude we are dealing with an actual 'departure' – even a denial – from moral motivations among leaders, to some extent from

<sup>11</sup> M.W. Martin, *Self-Deception and Morality*, Kansas 1986, p. 45.

<sup>12</sup> A.R. Mele, *Irrationality. An Essay on Akrasia, Self-Deception, and Self-Control*, New York–London 1987, pp. 121-137.

<sup>13</sup> M. W. Martin, *Self-Deception...*, pp. 7-8.

<sup>14</sup> R.D. Milo, *Immorality*, Princeton–New Jersey 1984, p. 12.

their credible ethical intentions, when the mechanism of moral indifference is a limitation to the realization of an authentic and/or transformational leadership model.<sup>15</sup>

The leader's observable ethical indifference, his specific axiological liability and moral 'anesthesia' are a barrier to the existence and sanctioning of common values. It is about shared and respected norms or moral systems both by the leader and the followers, although this may be defined not in positive terms but in opposition to 'them,' the 'others' who are in the opposition. In this sense, we are talking here about the ethical validation of leadership, where – using the arguments of James MacGregor Burns – leadership differs from power in that it tries to oppose the egoism of those in power (transcending the idea of self-interest of the leader in favor of a collective purpose) and does not refer only to pursuing their interests while ignoring, discrediting or rejecting the aspirations, interests, goals and motivations of the governed.<sup>16</sup>

Certainly, such a model of leadership resembles, by analogy, the contemporary concept of moral contractualism, where it is hypothetically assumed that the relationship between leader and followers is a kind of contract concluded between the sides. In this approach, referring, among others, to the considerations of Thomas Hobbes, we are talking about the default situation where concluding an inter-subject contract is the basis for shared patterns or rules. More broadly, it is a source of compliance with a supra-individual morality in the future, and ultimately an instrument for creating legitimate authority. Such normativity is also a premise for recognizing the leader's authority, which is highly desired among followers.<sup>17</sup>

It is clearly visible that if we are dealing with the leader's ethical liability, their moral cognitive dissonances, and their attitude of moral indifference, we are *de facto* talking about a practical denial of the idea of authentic leadership. Even if followers are able to forgive a lot and do not see the leader's hypocrisy, they do not perceive this acceptance or consent as morally based subordination. On the contrary, such leadership often becomes a mutual festival of hypocrisy, when the leader and followers rely on moral self-deception. It is a kind of spiral of mutual moral ignorance, which is most often driven by the desire for power and the desire for control on the part of the leader. However, for followers, it is a premise for the functioning of some formulas of electoral cynicism. At the same time, it may be a test not so much of the loyalty of the leader's supporters

<sup>15</sup> J.B. Ciulla, *The Search for Ethics in Leadership, Business, and Beyond*, Cham 2020, pp. 3-32; B.M. Bass, R.E. Riggio, *Transformational Leadership*, 2nd edition, New Jersey, 2006.

<sup>16</sup> J. M. Burns, *Leadership*. New York 2010, pp. 20-21; T.L. Price, *Leadership Ethics. An Introduction*, Cambridge 2008, pp. 72-74; J.B. Ciulla, D.R. Forsyth, "Leadership Ethics," in A. Bryman, D. Collinson et al., *The SAGE Handbook of Leadership*, London 2011, pp. 229-241.

<sup>17</sup> A. MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics. A History of Moral Philosophy from the Homeric Age to the Twentieth Century*, London 1998, pp. 78-93; T.M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, Cambridge 1998; S. Reibetanz, "Contractualism and Aggregation," *Ethics*, vol. 108, no. 2 (1998), pp. 296-311; P. Pettit, "A Consequentialist Perspective on Contractualism," *Theoria*, vol. 66, no. 3 (2000), pp. 228-236; G. Dworkin, "Contractualism and the Normativity of Principles," *Ethics*, vol. 112, no. 3 (2002), pp. 471-482; T.L. Price, *Understanding Ethical Failures in Leadership*, Cambridge 2006, pp. 94-102; D. Gauthier, *Morals by Agreement*, New York 1986, p. 9.

itself, but rather of a certain political tactic based on their desire to obtain the greatest possible benefits or privileges through the agency of a representative – their own leader.

## DIRTY HANDS

The issue of dirty hands in party leadership can be interpreted as a practical moral dilemma that is closely related to the leader's utilitarian activities, the functions they perform in the party organization or their duties and obligations towards rank-and-file party members and his own electorate. It is also a philosophical discussion on the morality of political decision-makers, when specific ways of acting or deciding are analyzed (or, more precisely, choices between decision-making alternatives) with the reservation that they are inappropriate and/or morally questionable. In other words, these are political situations in which leaders deliberately confabulate, intrigue, manipulate or are even methodical liars. According to the rule, competing for power or creating and maintaining leadership asymmetry inevitably becomes a sign of getting your hands dirty. To some extent, it is synonymous with the existence of an amoral attitude or ethically ambivalent behavior. As Michael Walzer rightly emphasized, politicians willingly take on such negative roles and become scammers and liars, and more importantly, they perceive this type of methods as an effective source of political accreditation. Therefore, a politician: *[h]ustles, lies, and intrigues for us – or so he claims. Perhaps he is right, or at least sincere, but we suspect that he acts for himself also. Indeed, he cannot serve us without serving himself, for success brings him power and glory, the greatest rewards that men can win from their fellows. The competition for these two is fierce, the risks are often great, but the temptations are greater. (...) Hustling and lying are necessary because power and glory are so desirable – that is, so widely desired. And so the men who act for us and in our name are necessarily hustlers and liars.*<sup>18</sup>

The self-interest of the leader means that the complex and dynamic process of leadership is, on the one hand, identified with performative role-playing, a certain staged masquerade of the leader. This is a manifestation of theatricalization and trivialization of leadership mechanisms, where appearances and putting on masks are a source of political legitimacy or a synonym of effectiveness.<sup>19</sup> It is worth citing the arguments of Niccolò Machiavelli here, who analyzed the moral tensions resulting from political activity. The philosopher emphasized that an effective ruler is a politician whose political activity should be based on the principle of 'not being good'. This is the primary principle in shaping political leadership. According to Machiavelli's argumentation: *A man who wishes to make a profession of goodness in everything must necessarily come to grief among so many who are not good. Therefore it is necessary for a prince, who wishes to*

<sup>18</sup> M. Walzer, "Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands," in *Thinking Politically. Essays in Political Theory*, selected and ed. D. Miller, New Haven–London 2007, p. 280.

<sup>19</sup> B. Williams, *Morality. An Introduction to Ethics*, Cambridge 2012; P. Rosanvallon, *Counter-Democracy. Politics in an Age of Distrust*, Cambridge 2008, pp. 227-248.

*maintain himself, to learn how not to be good, and to use this knowledge and not use it, according to the necessity of the case.*<sup>20</sup>

In Walzer's interpretation, the Italian thinker not only convincingly explained the sociotechnical principle of politics that the end justifies all means, but also showed that in government this principle is a practical rule of dirty hands. In this understanding, the defined goal (gaining or maintaining power) by a politician becomes the superior formula and/or causative premise that justifies all means – deeds, including evil or morally questionable ones (when the act accuses, the result excuses). In other words, Machiavelli's argument is basically a hint (instruction) for politicians who, if they want to be effective in achieving their intended political goals, must learn how to 'not be a good person'. Only with such a perspective and with such beliefs are politicians and their supporters able to accept bad deeds. Hence: *The deceitful and cruel politician is excused (if he succeeds) only in the sense that the rest of us come to agree that the results were "worth it" or, more likely, that we simply forget his crimes when we praise his success.*<sup>21</sup>

It is worth emphasizing here that referencing moral values, glorifying them and at the same time instrumentalizing them, has been and still remains a constant political practice among right-wing and left-wing populists in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. In most cases, appeals to morality or the 'moral majority' of followers by populist leaders serve to legitimize their power (hegemony), and may even allow them to manipulatively justify their own lies, coercion, or violence against citizens. For instance, left-wing populism can be exemplified by the Mexican neo-Zapatista movement or the Brazilian Landless Workers' Movement (Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra – MST). These not only voiced demands for a radical break with colonial atavism, but also featured moral rhetoric and postulates of a moral-political nature. In the case of the Latin American world, it was not only about criticizing or creating a political counterweight to the imperialist North Atlantic hegemony, which was accompanied by the mercantilization of social relations or the McDonaldization of culture, but also about the revalorization of identity by referring to a specific axiology, in which the ethics of care for nature, the earth or exploited local communities appeared. This is why neo-Zapatista leaders spoke of 'all the peoples of the world', of transcending the Eurocentric category of citizenship in the spirit of internationalism. Such instrumental appeals to cosmopolitan values were intended, on the one hand, to strengthen the fight for the overthrow of capitalism on a global scale, and, on the other, to contribute to the decolonization of states and the protection of the natural environment.<sup>22</sup> Another example is the leader of the Brazilian Landless Workers' Movement, João Pedro Stedile, who declared that the movement's fight for agrarian reform is everyone's fight because it is a fight against neoliberalism, which is to some extent a great simplification, and as

<sup>20</sup> N. Machiavelli, *The Prince*, New York 2017, p. 48.

<sup>21</sup> M. Walzer, "Political Action...", p. 289.

<sup>22</sup> L.M. Andrade, *Religion Without Redemption. Social Contradictions and Awakened Dreams in Latin America*, London 2015, pp. 15-70.

a political strategy it can be read as moralizing rhetoric aimed at generating the desired enthusiasm or support from followers for specific projects and benefits of the leader.<sup>23</sup>

One of the interesting features of dirty populism is reflected in the way that left-wing populists can turn into right-wing populists, as has happened in Venezuela and Nicaragua. In Venezuela, Hugo Chávez came to power at the head of a socialist revolution, expressed a strong commitment to democracy, and instituted a series of reforms to implement a fairly radical version of democracy, for example by instituting local councils that went beyond most schemes of participatory budgeting to make final budgetary decisions, not merely advise policymakers.<sup>24</sup> More importantly, Chávez was a fierce critic of neoliberal capitalism and sought to implement economic policies to benefit the poor and working class, including by establishing worker-owned businesses.<sup>25</sup> These policies were effective, as from 2003-2011 Venezuela saw *a 30 percent reduction in poverty, a 71 percent decline in extreme poverty, a steep drop in inequality...and an impressive if contradictory process of popular empowerment.*<sup>26</sup> However, a slide toward autocracy that began under Chávez was accelerated after his death by his hand-picked successor, Nicolás Maduro. As Hetland puts it, *Maduro's rule has been characterized by the consolidation of an increasingly repressive form of authoritarianism and predatory capitalism.*<sup>27</sup> The path that Daniel Ortega has taken in Nicaragua has been somewhat different. After gaining power in a socialist revolution in 1979, Ortega lost power in 1990, before being re-elected as president in 2006. As Thaler puts it, Ortega has *shape-shifted from left-wing revolutionary populist to right-leaning neopatrimonial dictator in the older Latin American style.*<sup>28</sup> In both cases the leaders maintain the rhetoric of left-wing populism, justifying their repressive measures by saying that they are necessary to protect their radical revolutions against U.S. hegemony, all while instituting policies and practices that can only be understood from the perspective of right-wing populism, as they consolidate power and wealth in the hands of a small class of elites in business and the military.

<sup>23</sup> W. Wolford, *This Land Is Ours Now. Social Mobilization and the Meanings of Land in Brazil*, Durham 2010.

<sup>24</sup> Hawkins K., "Populism in Venezuela. The Rise of Chavismo...; Hawkins K., "Chavismo, Liberal Democracy, and Radical Democracy," *Annual Review of Political Science*, vol. 19 (2016), pp. 311-329.

<sup>25</sup> Yaffe H., "Venezuela: Building a Socialist Communal Economy?," *International Critical Thought*, vol. 5 no. 1 (2015), pp. 23-41.

<sup>26</sup> Hetland G., "Capitalism and Authoritarianism in Maduro's Venezuela," *New Labor Forum*, vol. 34, no. 2 (2025), p. 62.

<sup>27</sup> Hetland G., "Capitalism and Authoritarianism in Maduro's Venezuela..."

<sup>28</sup> Thaler K.M., "Nicaragua. A Return to Caudillismo," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 28 no. 2 (2017), p. 157.

## ‘DIRTY’ LEADER – THE TRUMP PHENOMENON

Which brings us to Donald Trump, who in many ways is the embodiment of Walzer’s hustler-as-politician. In his first term in office and subsequently in the interregnum between terms and again in his second term, Trump firmly established the use of falsehood as a governing norm. In fact, Trump’s open use of falsehoods – even, at times, contradicting himself within a single statement – has become a standard that others, particularly in the Republican Party, have embraced as a tactic.<sup>29</sup> For example, during the 2024 campaign, then-candidate for Vice President J.D. Vance said that he felt it was perfectly legitimate to ‘create stories’ in his public statements.<sup>30</sup> Trump’s open embrace of falsehood has led to voters accepting as fact the idea that ‘all politicians lie,’ which then suggests that the standard of judgment for voters is a matter of which politicians’ lies are more compelling as opposed to which has a better grasp of the facts. Indeed, ‘facts’ are no longer considered as important as a ‘truth’ which one has already accepted in the absence of any factual basis; the invention of ‘facts’ to support that ‘truth’ is then seen as a legitimate basis for advocating for one’s policy preferences.<sup>31</sup>

The normalization of falsehood is only one part of the Trump phenomenon. We may add that the first Trump administration, and even more so the second, involves a normalization of corruption at the highest levels. Trump’s corrupt business practices are well-documented,<sup>32</sup> as is his use of the presidency to direct business to his enterprises in his first term.<sup>33</sup> His second term, however, brings corruption to a new level. Indeed, Trump’s corruption takes several forms. In the first place, Aristotle’s definition of corrupt (‘perverted’) rule as rule in the interests of the rulers, not the people as a whole, certainly applies here. The pardoning, on his second day in office, of approximately 1500 people convicted of having taken part in the January 6, 2021 insurrection that sought to prevent the transfer of power to Joe Biden after Trump’s election loss represents the use of his pardoning power to directly advance the interests of his most fervent supporters. At the same time it represents a different kind of corruption, in the sense of a corruption of norms of respect for the rule of law, particularly in the case of violence against the police.

<sup>29</sup> It should be acknowledged that Democrats also spread falsehoods at times, but only Republican politicians have openly embraced the distribution of false information as a political tactic.

<sup>30</sup> E. Helmore, “JD Vance Admits He Is Willing to ‘Create Stories’ to Get Media Attention,” *The Guardian*, 15 September 2024, at <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/sep/15/jd-vance-lies-haitian-immigrants>, 18 March 2025.

<sup>31</sup> Kim M., Hahl O., Poskanzer E. et al., “When Truth Trumps Facts: Studies on Partisan Moral Flexibility in American Politics,” *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 130, no. 1 (2024), pp. 1-69.

<sup>32</sup> A. Prokop, “Donald Trump’s History of Corruption. A Comprehensive Review,” *Vox*, 31 October 2016, at <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2016/9/28/12904136/donald-trump-corrupt>, 28 March 2025.

<sup>33</sup> “President Trump’s Legacy of Corruption, Four Years and 3,700 Conflicts of Interest Later,” *Crew*, 15 January 2001, at <https://www.citizensforethics.org/reports-investigations/crew-reports/president-trump-legacy-corruption-3700-conflicts-interest/>, 28 March 2025.

Trump's corruption also extends to undermining the rule of law in the everyday operation of his administration. While U.S. presidents are expected to exercise some discretion and executive prerogative has long been accepted as a principle of governing,<sup>34</sup> the Impoundment Control Act (ICA), passed in 1974, limits the degree to which a president can deviate from Congressional appropriations.<sup>35</sup> President Trump's efforts to summarily dispose of entire federal programs such as the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) appear to violate the ICA.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, the sudden closure of offices and firing of employees whose jobs are protected by law are an assertion of executive power that reflects a lack of respect for the rule of law and the role of Congress to determine policy, even as the US Supreme Court has thus far declined to step in to halt these actions. Trump's challenge to the rule of law also extends to undermining the bedrock principles articulated in the U.S. Constitution of separation of powers and checks and balances in the US political system by criticizing judges who have ruled against him and taking actions that appear to violate judicial orders<sup>37</sup> and in his use of emergency declarations to enact policies by decree – everything from imposing tariffs to suspending rights to due process for immigrants to engaging in extrajudicial killings.<sup>38</sup>

Finally, the Trump administration's second term has been marked by flagrant violation of the unwritten norms and standards that have maintained a kind of balance within the American political system. One of the ways this has been manifested is in the appointment of people with virtually no experience or expertise into significant roles in the government, such as Pete Hegseth as Defense Secretary or Tulsi Gabbard as Director of National Intelligence. Another manifestation comes in the use (some might say invention) of presidential powers to force compliance with executive directives of questionable legality, for example by blocking the Associated Press (AP) from White House events because of its refusal to follow the Trump administration's renaming of the Gulf

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<sup>34</sup> See, e.g., Locke J., *Second Treatise of Government*, ed. C.B. McPherson, Indianapolis 1980.

<sup>35</sup> Z. Price, "A Primer on the Impoundment Control Act," *Lawfare*, 28 January 2025, at <https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/a-primer-on-the-impoundment-control-act>, 18 March 2025.

<sup>36</sup> B. Pierson, "US Judge Finds Musk's USAID Cuts Likely Unconstitutional, Blocks Him from Making More Cuts," *Reuters*, 19 March 2025, at <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-judge-bars-musk-doge-further-efforts-shut-down-usaid-2025-03-18/>, 18 March 2025; "Background on Unlawful Impoundment in President Trump's Executive Orders," *Fact Sheets and Background*, 29 January 2025, at <https://democrats-appropriations.house.gov/news/fact-sheets/background-unlawful-impoundment-president-trumps-executive-orders>, 18 March 2025. As of late August, 2025, this effort has been blocked by the courts (M. Macagnone, "US Asks Supreme Court to Take Action in USAID Funding Challenge," *Roll Call*, 27 August 2025, at <https://rollcall.com/2025/08/27/us-asks-supreme-court-to-take-action-in-usaid-funding-challenge/>, 23 September 2025).

<sup>37</sup> L. Broadwater, A. Sun, A. Correal et al., "A Judge Ordered Deportation Planes to Turn Around. The White House Didn't Listen," *The New York Times*, 17 March 2025, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/17/us/politics/timeline-trump-deportation-flights-el-salvador.html>, 18 March 2025).

<sup>38</sup> A.B. Kushner, "Can Trump Just Do Whatever He Wants by Declaring Emergencies?," *The New York Times*, 4 September 2025, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/09/04/briefing/trump-emergency-presidential-power.html>, 23 September 2025.

of Mexico to the Gulf of America,<sup>39</sup> or in the withholding of \$400 million in federal funding to Columbia University for its alleged failure to provide a safe environment for Jewish students.<sup>40</sup> The Trump administration has also broken with the tradition of independence for key federal agencies such as the Justice Department and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI).<sup>41</sup> Finally, the administration has initiated numerous attacks on the opposition party. While such attacks are not altogether unusual – while in power from 2021-24 Democrats undertook several investigations of Donald Trump and his supporters – the scope and extent of the current efforts are unprecedented and, in the words of one observer, amounts to an attempt *to cut the legs out from their opposition*.<sup>42</sup>

Trump's response to all this is that his actions are intended to root out deep-seated corruption of the federal government – the 'deep state' – which, from his perspective, has been growing for decades under both Democratic and Republican leadership. His stated intent is to 'make America great again' by, in effect, dismantling the federal government, except for those elements that support his objectives. He claims a broad mandate to do so, although in fact his election victory involved one of the smallest margins in generations. That many of the claims he made during the campaign (and continues to make) – about the 'deep state', an 'invasion' across the southern border, etc. – have repeatedly been disproven has had little to no effect on him or his supporters, largely thanks to the existence of a right-wing media ecosystem centered around him that is hostile to any facts or perspectives that might challenge or undermine the dicta of their leader. Even Machiavelli might blush to see the depth of Trump's challenge to the existing order and his ability to manipulate public perceptions of his actions.

Machiavelli's advice to the new prince was clear: if one must be cruel to take control, do it quickly, do it decisively, and get it over with. It is possible that what we are witnessing in these still-early days of the Trump administration is some version of that. However, there are some key differences between Machiavelli's prince and the Trump administration, between Florence in the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and the United States at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup>. For one thing, the prince was to take control in a monarchical system in which the prince's word was law and in the absence of a constitution that established limits to the prince's power. The United States of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is, in

<sup>39</sup> L. Easton, "AP Statement on Oval Office Access," *AP*, 11 February 2025, at <https://www.ap.org/the-definitive-source/announcements/ap-statement-on-oval-office-access/>, 18 March 2025.

<sup>40</sup> Sh. Otterman, L. Stack, "White House Cancels \$400 Million in Grants and Contracts to Columbia," *The New York Times*, 7 March 2025, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/07/nyregion/trump-administration-columbia-grants-cancelled-antisemitism.html>, at 18 March 2025.

<sup>41</sup> A. Goldman, "With Arrival of Bongino, Trump Loyalists Take Command of the F.B.I.," *The New York Times*, 17 March 2025, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/17/us/politics/bongino-patel-fbi-trump.html?searchResultPosition=1>, 20 March 2025; A. Blake, "Trump's Open Weaponization of the Government," *CNN*, 22 September 2025, at <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/09/22/politics/weaponization-trump-biden-analysis>, 23 September 2025.

<sup>42</sup> K.P. Vogel, Sh. Goldmacher, "With Orders, Investigations and Innuendo, Trump and G.O.P. Aim to Cripple the Left," *The New York Times*, 19 March 2025, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/19/us/politics/trump-republicans-attack-democrats-actblue.html?searchResultPosition=1>, 20 March 2025.

contrast, a constitutional democratic republic in which the people are understood to be sovereign with a well-established body of law and tradition of respect for governing norms and established limits to executive power. In addition, Machiavelli is very clear that this cruelty is only to be directed toward corrupt elites, members of the nobility, who seek to undermine the ruler and whose actions are contrary to the public interest (1994, 152). Trump's actions, however, are not directed at members of the elite (many of whom, like Elon Musk, have been made part of his government or otherwise have offered their support) but at tens of thousands of lower- and mid-level government employees who, in many cases, provided essential services (e.g., over 70,000 workers from the Department of Veterans Affairs).<sup>43</sup> This, along with economic policies such as tariffs that will inevitably cause inflation, public health policies that reduce services and protections, and environmental policies that will contribute to climate change and pollution, suggest that the cruelty Trump inflicts will, in fact, be long-lasting.

## CONCLUSION

To sum up the considerations so far, we would like to formulate several conclusions about 'dirty' right-wing populist leadership:

1. Contemporary 'dirty' right-wing leadership is a practical denial of the charismatic and visionary models of leadership, especially the Weberian approach, in which the leader is treated as an unconditionally distinguished person among the masses.<sup>44</sup> The political leader is treated here as an extraordinary authority (charismatic pattern to emulate) who is not only able to create the atmosphere of exceptionalism, but who also transgresses in thinking and acting in interactions with followers. In this sense, a 'dirty' leader should not be identified with a person who has some 'unusual property', and this 'unusual property' is to be a source of authority. Rather we should consider the 'dirty' leader as a self-confident and assertive liar. This is a politician who should be largely seen as a pseudo-charismatic leader or a leader whose charismatic personality is based on mystification (invented and propaganda-produced above-average). In other words, a leader whose *weak and meager real values are exaggerated, as well as values that the leader does not possess are feigned*.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>43</sup> A. Choi, D. Gainor, K. Carroll, "Tracking Trump's Overhaul of the Federal Workforce," *CNN*, 14 July 2025, at <https://www.cnn.com/politics/tracking-federal-workforce-firings-dg/index.html>, 27 March 2025. Apparently, hundreds of those fired employees are now being reinstated because the agencies involved discovered, after the fact, that those employees performed vital functions ("After Cost-Cutting Blitz, Trump Administration Rehires Hundreds of Laid-Off Employees," *The Atlanta Journal Constitution*, at <https://www.ajc.com/news/2025/09/after-cost-cutting-blitz-trump-administration-rehires-hundreds-of-laid-off-employees/>, 23 September 2025).

<sup>44</sup> J.A. Conger, "Charismatic Leadership," in A. Bryman, D. Collinson, K. Grint (eds), *The SAGE Handbook of Leadership*, London 2011, pp. 86-102; J. Antonakis, "Charisma and the 'New Leadership,'" in J. Antonakis, D.V. Day (eds) *Nature of Leadership*, London 2018, pp. 56-81.

<sup>45</sup> M. Karwat, "Charyzma i pseudocharyzma," *Studia Politologiczne*, vol. 5 (2000), pp. 126-175.

Let us add that even if the political obedience of the followers is motivated by recognition, respect, admiration, and fascination towards the leader, it should be remembered that his leadership attitude, behavior, and image are only a cynical game of appearances, behind which are hidden his own interests, needs and goals – in a broader context, it is a violation of the rules, norms, constitution, and institutional order, which temporarily hinders the leader's egoism.

2. A 'dirty' right-wing populist is an example of a politician who, in the spirit of Machiavelli, is not only guided in his political activity by deliberate, methodical cunning or a refined desire for power, but also is a denial of the realization of common ethical attitudes between himself and his followers, i.e. real transformations both sides of leadership asymmetry [the antithesis of the transformational models of leadership<sup>46</sup>]. In this approach, moral indifference and the logic of 'so what' are used as a premise for the populist leader to cynically idealize influence or spread a false belief about the fulfillment of the social or political expectations of followers. At the same time, there is a mechanism of trivialization and ignorance in relation to the mechanism of individualized consideration, when the leader, by definition, supports and carefully listens to the needs and expectations of followers.
3. The above theses largely relate to Donald Trump's leadership practices. But not only President Trump. Liberal democracy rests on a set of assumptions about elites – that they will possess a greater degree of integrity and honesty, as well as a greater capacity to recognize the common good and the means to achieve it. But what happens when a people choose a populist leader who does not have those characteristics? Does it reflect a problem with democracy itself (that is, with the people themselves), or does it reflect a problem with the way we do democracy? Elite-driven liberal democracy appears to suffer from a weakness – potentially fatal – to the degree that it can be captured by a corrupt individual who sees himself as a kind of Machiavellian prince whom destiny has called to use whatever means necessary to exercise complete control – whether Trump, or Viktor Orban, or Vladimir Putin, or Recep Erdogan, or Nicolás Maduro.
4. Based on the distinction we made between right-wing and left-wing populists, we can get a clear sense of the hypocrisy and cynicism of right-wing populism, as it uses the poor and working class as instruments to take power and consolidate it – without actually doing anything to improve their lives. Their promises ring hollow, often making people in the lower classes worse off, even as they use lies and manipulation to blame the left for the people's condition. The example of the U.S. Republicans' 'Big Beautiful Bill', which will lead to reductions in public assistance in food, housing and healthcare is a case in point. In this regard, right-wing populism particularly 'dirty' is the way it shamelessly manipulates the *demos* to get the poor and working class to think they are acting in their own interests when, in fact, they are working against it. Left-wing populists will at least try to use their power

<sup>46</sup> B.M. Bass, R. E. Riggio, *Transformational Leadership...*, p. 15; A.J. DuBrin, *Leadership. Research Findings, Practice, and Skills*, 10th edition, Boston 2022, pp. 56-84.

to institute policies that will benefit the poor, often in the face of stiff opposition from global elites. However, as left-wing populists turn into right-wing populists, we can see a kind of double-deception and even deeper corruption, as they continue to use the leftist rhetoric and verbally attack the capitalist class – all while engaging in practices that funnel money and power to elites.

5. Ultimately, all this cynicism, corruption, and movement toward autocracy represents a kind of anti-political politics, where power is exercised to disempower both one's opponents and the state (as a formal institution bounded by laws and tasked with defending and executing the law) itself. As any absolutist rule is anti-political, any movement toward absolutism is an anti-political movement. Although absolutism can be understood as an extreme form of autocracy, even though it falls short of that extreme, autocracy seeks to control and limit the range of contestation that is allowable. The dirty hands of a right-wing populist who violates both formal, constitutionally-established limits as well as informal norms and standards in order to bring about an autocratic regime is thus engaged in an anti-political effort that is carried out through political means. Thus the rise of 'dirty' right-wing populists bent on establishing 'post-liberal' autocratic regimes are not only a threat to the lives and well-being of their subjects, but also a threat to politics itself.

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**Filip PIERZCHALSKI** – Associate Professor at the Department of Political Theory and Political Thought, Faculty of Political Science and International Studies, University of Warsaw. Researcher in political theory, political philosophy.

**Mark J. KASWAN** – Full Professor in the School of Political Science, Public Affairs, Legal and Security Studies, University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. His work crosses boundaries, drawing from political theory, sociology, philosophy, economics, public policy, feminism, history, business and management studies, organizational theory, and race and ethnic studies.