

## The Authoritarian Personality in A Contemporary Theatrical Adaptation of Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here*

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### **ABSTRACT**

The authoritarian personality is ubiquitous in life, literature, and film. The representation of the dictator is present in almost every literary genre, but what explains the authoritarian personality's unquestionable appeal to so many? The present paper aims at explaining this phenomenon in Taccone & Cohen's theatrical adaptation of Sinclair Lewis's novel *It Can't Happen Here* (1935). The recent theatrical adaptation of this classic comes as a reaction to the controversial rhetoric employed by Trump's presidential campaign of 2016 maybe to remind the public of the dangers born out of the American exceptionalism that American democracy is safe and it cannot go wrong. The paper analyses the character of Berzelius Windrip using Erich Fromm's concepts of authoritarianism and sado-masochism to explain both the authoritarian personality's make up and its attractiveness for part of the public opinion. In addition, Gustave Le Bon's ideas as projected in his seminal work of crowd psychology, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, will be utilized to explain part of the mass's embrace of dictatorship.

**Key words:** Authoritarianism, democracy, dictatorship, Fromm, *It Can't Happen Here*, Le Bon.

الشخصية الاستبدادية في التكييف المسرحي المعاصر لرواية سنكلير لويس لا يمكن أن يحدث

هنا

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## الملخص

الشخصية الاستبدادية منتشرة في الحياة والأدب والسينما. إن صورة الديكتاتور موجودة في كل الأنواع الأدبية تقريباً، ولكن ما الذي يفسر جاذبية الشخصية الاستبدادية والتي يتبعها الكثيرون بدون تفكير؟ يهدف البحث الحالي إلى تفسير هذه الظاهرة في التكييف المسرحي لرواية سنكلير لويس لا يمكن أن يحدث هنا (١٩٣٥). يأتي التكييف المسرحي الأخير لهذه الرواية الكلاسيكية كرد فعل على الخطاب المثير للجدل الذي استخدمته حملة ترامب الرئاسية لعام ٢٠١٦ و ربما لتذكير الجمهور بالمخاطر الناجمة عن المفهوم الأمريكي بأن الديمقراطية الأمريكية آمنة ولا يمكن أن تحيد عن طريقها. يحلل البحث شخصية بيرزيليوس ويندرين مستخدماً مفاهيم إريك فروم حول الاستبداد والمزوخية السادية لتفسير تركيبة الشخصية الاستبدادية وجاذبيتها لجزء من الرأي العام. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، فإن أفكار غوستاف لوبون كما عرضها في عمله الرائد في علم نفس الجماهير، "سيكولوجية الجماهير"، سيتم استخدامها لشرح جزء من أسباب إيمان الجماهير بالديكتاتورية.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الاستبدادية، الديمقراطية، الديكتاتورية، فروم، لا يمكن أن يحدث هنا، لوبون.

## Introduction

The theatrical adaptation of Sinclair Lewis's classic, *It Can't Happen Here*, is part of a whole body of literature that comes into being just before and after Trump's ascendancy to power. Works such as Jonathan Lethem's *The Feral Detective* (2018), *Unsheltered* by Barbara Kingsolver (2018), Gary Shteyngart's *Lake Success* (2018), *The New Order* (2018) by Karen E. Bender, and Mark Dotson's *Trump Sky Alpha* (2019), are only a few examples of this growing body of literature. D. Resano (2022), editor of *American Literature in the Era of Trumpism*, believes that the era after Trump is distinct both for its literary and cultural productions. Furthermore, she refers to this era as the "new American reality" which is characterized by a complete blurring of the line between fiction and nonfiction (p.3). In fact, Trump has performed a "structured reality show" (O'Gorman & MacLaren, 2017) that has in many ways altered the notion of 'America' and its 'reality.' Hence, Harris (2015), while reviewing *It Can't Happen Here*, contends that "80

years later the novel feels frighteningly contemporary.” The original novel was meant to confront the rising tide of fascism that was spreading throughout Europe between the two World Wars. Lewis intended his novel as a wakeup call to Americans that could be the case in the land of liberalism. The novel was written at the height of the Depression in 1935, and it envisioned what would happen if a populist/fascist won the presidential election of 1936. Fascism was already taking root in Italy and Germany, and it was on the rise in America, mainly through Senator Huey Long. The novel was adapted into a play in 1937 as a cautionary dark tale about the instability of democracy. The dramatic adaption was not successful theatrical show; however, it was a successful propaganda against fascist leanings of the times in the U.S. Gary Scharnhorst (2014) writes that:

eighteen cities staged Lewis’s adaptation of the novel back in 1937. In New York, there was a Yiddish production, and there was a Spanish-language one in Tampa. Taccone and Peterson plan for a similar campaign, with a nationwide reading of the play on October 24th: at the Su Teatro, in Denver; the Jefferson Parish Library, in Louisiana; the Metropolitan Playhouse, in Manhattan; and elsewhere. If it can happen in Berkeley, it can happen anywhere. (as cited in Nazaryan, 2016)

In fact, the title sentence of the novel was not the coinage of Sinclair Lewis himself, rather, it was a common remark during the period, showing Americans’ conviction that their country is immune to dictatorship. This conviction seems to continue to be true in 2016 and therefore Tony Taccone’s and Bennett Cohen’s adaptation of the classic appears to be timely and necessary.

In 2016, as the Presidential primaries were under way and the candidacy of Donald Trump was proving more than a passing hilarity, Taccone and Cohen’s revival of *It Can’t Happen Here*, directed by Lisa Peterson, of the Berkeley Repertory Theatre, in Berkeley, California,

captivated audiences across the United States with its timely and thought-provoking themes that seemed to resonate deeply with the political climate of the 21st century. However, the authors almost have created a totally new play that better suited the threat it aimed at highlighting. The new theatrical adaptation foreshadowed Donald Trump's authoritarian appeal. It predicted the disturbing results of the 2016 presidential race. Its profound effect resonated with audiences nationwide, igniting conversations and encouraging reflections on relevant sociopolitical matters. Eventually, Trump became the 45th president of the United States and served the office from 2017 to 2021. His presidency divided the country severely and probably brought to mind Hitler's slogan of making Germany great again. The present paper aims at studying Taccone & Cohen's theatrical adaptation of the aforementioned novel to examine the personality of the dictator and the factors that lead people to embrace him as a leader through the concepts presented by Le Bon as projected in his seminal work, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (1895) and Erich Fromm's concepts of authoritarianism as outlined in his book *Fear of Freedom* (1941).

### **The Crowd**

In Fromm's *Fear of Freedom*, the concept of the "dictator" is a central theme in understanding the human condition and the rise of authoritarian regimes. Fromm argues that humans have innate desire for freedom and individuality; however, their quest for freedom is also a source of anxiety and insecurity. Individuals feel helpless under the pressure of modern world individualism and personal responsibility; therefore, they try to escape from freedom which, according to Fromm (1960) "result[s] from the insecurity of the isolated individual" (p. 120). The "dictator" represents the embodiment of this escape from freedom. As people grapple with the complexities and uncertainties of a free

society, they may develop a longing for a strong and authoritarian leader who promises to provide clear answers, guidance, and a sense of belonging. The dictator appeals to the masses by promising to relieve their anxieties, restore a sense of order, and protect them from perceived threats,

the masochistic and submissive character aims — at least subconsciously — to become a part of a larger unit, a pendant, a particle, at least a small one, of this “great” person, this “great” institution, or this “great” idea. The person, institution, or idea may actually be significant, powerful, or just incredibly inflated by the individual believing in them. What is necessary, is that — in a subjective manner — the individual is convinced that “his” leader, party, state, or idea is all-powerful and supreme, that he himself is strong and great, that he is a part of something “greater.” (Fromm, 1960, p.122)

In addition, Le Bon (1960) believes that “crowds exhibit a docile respect for force, and are but slightly impressed by kindness, which for them is scarcely other than a form of weakness” (p. 54). The character of Buzz Windrip embodies the classic traits of a demagogue, appealing to people’s fears and desires to gain power. At the meeting of the Fort Beulah Rotary Club Mrs. Gimmitch, a member of Daughters of the American Revolution organization, is enthusiastic about him being the next president, “And the only candidate running for president daring to speak the truth, the only man who has the backbone to stand up to our enemies and can restore our country to greatness is Senator Berzelius Windrip!” (Taccone & Cohen, 2016, p. 12). She voices the fears and hopes of a big segment of the public in the United States. Furthermore, Crowley, a banker, articulates a similar sensation later in scene 2 of Act 1, “With Buzz Windrip running for president we finally have a real choice” (Taccone & Cohen, 2016, p. 14). He represents that section of the crowds who is worried about the economic growth in the country and

thinks that Senator Windrip has all the right answers because he has “a great head for business” (Taccone & Cohen, 2016, p. 14).

On the opposite side, Doremus Jessup, editor-in-chief of The Daily Informer, and Mrs. Lorinda Pike represent that section of the public that is petrified at the prospect of a possible Windrip presidency. While addressing the Rotary Club Lorinda says, “You’re all missing the point. People will vote for Buzz to make themselves feel safe. But they’re ignoring what he’s actually saying. If he gets into office, he’s going to unleash a Reign of Terror” (Taccone & Cohen, 2016, p. 15). It is very clear that she could see that Windrip is using the peoples’ fears and desires to get into the office and practice absolute power over the country. She is convinced that, “If Buzz Windrip gets elected, we’ll all be done” (Taccone & Cohen, 2016, p. 15). Those who endorse Windrip’s presidency are clear examples of the ‘masochistic and submissive’ described by Fromm. Cowley states, “I think we can officially classify Widow Pike as a hysteric” (Taccone & Cohen, 2016, p. 15). Tasbrough, a businessman, thinks that Mrs. Pike is over exaggerating and voices the Americans’ conviction that their country is immune to dictatorship, “This is America, for God’s sake. It could never happen” (Taccone & Cohen, 2016, p. 15). He describes Mrs. Pike and her friends as “subversive elements” (Taccone & Cohen, 2016, p. 16) and warns Doremus against giving them voice through his newspaper.

Doremus seems to share Mrs. Pike’s point of view, but, unlike her, he is confident that American electorates will elect wisely, “A blind mule has a greater chance of being elected President than Buzz Windrip” (Taccone & Cohen, 2016, p. 16). He believes that only a minority of the public actually supports him. Phillip, Doremus’s son, feels that his father is marginalizing the problem, “What I was trying to say, Dad, is that even if it’s a minority that’s supporting Senator Windrip, you’re marginalizing the problem” (Taccone & Cohen, 2016, p. 29). He knows that he has

“some terrible and inflammatory things,” however; the number of his supporters is growing by the day” (Taccone & Cohen, 2016, p. 28). He thinks that Windrip is appealing to peoples’ desire to belong and to be represented, “People want a voice. They want agency over their lives” (Taccone & Cohen, 2016, p. 28). Shad Ledue, a poor farmer, supports Buzz because “He’s willing to fight for things. For the working man” (Taccone & Cohen, 2016, p. 29). Phillip makes it clear to his father that although he is convinced that Buzz is lying and therefore he will not win, it is important to realize that they are facing a real threat, “The truth for you may not be the same truth for the average man” (Taccone & Cohen, 2016, p. 29).

Doremus’s naïve conviction shatters as Windrip, surprisingly enough, secures the Democratic nomination. For the first time, he feels that the threat is real and Buzz could actually end up in the White House. Doremus wants to know the secret to Buzz’s growing popularity; therefore, he travels up and down Beulah Valley, getting interviews with people. The kind of masses that endorse his nomination and will vote for him are just other ‘masochistic and submissive,’ according to Fromm, characters who are in need of belonging to something bigger than themselves promising them prosperity and gains,

M1, an older working class man; W1, an older working class woman, W2, a poor mom on relief; M2, a hardline quasi-thug; M3, a college grad who can’t find a job; M4, a working class guy who lost his house, and M5, a middle class Republican who’s leaning towards Buzz. (Taccone & Cohen, 2016, p. 32)

According to Le Bon (1960) the masses do not care about the truth and whoever supplies them with “illusions” is their “master” (p. 110). In this case, Buzz is truly selling people pipe dreams until he could take hold of the office. He manipulates their desires and needs to his own benefits and his vehicle for doing so is his discourse. According to Le Bon



(1960), “crowds are influenced mainly by images produced by the judicious employment of words and formulas” (p. 102). The crowds are captivated by Buzz’s discourse about economic growth and monetary rewards. The following conversation shows into what extent the crowd is influenced by Buzz’s illusions of prosperity:

SHAD: Plus he’s going to fix it so everybody will get five thousand bucks, immediate.

DOREMUS: Exactly, it’s about money.

SHAD: I figure I can start a chicken farm.

DOREMUS: Chickens? Didn’t all our chickens die on your watch last year?

SHAD: With that kinda money I’ll be able to buy a couple thousand. Beat the odds this time.

DOREMUS: And so you believe Senator Windrip will fulfill this promise of giving away this money?

PHILIP: It’s a monetary incentive.

SHAD: I already started buying some equipment. On credit.

DOREMUS (*shocked*) Credit? The bank gave you credit on Windrip’s campaign promise?

SHAD: Seems good enough for them.

DOREMUS: Really? A five-thousand-dollar credit to buy chickens?

SHAD: People make ten times that on a good farm. I wouldn’t sell low on chickens, if I was you, Mr. Jessup. I been reading up on ’em. (Taccone & Cohen, 2016, pp. 29–30)

Shad and the majority of the characters in the play are willing to believe Buzz’s promises and ready to join his campaign; ready even to suppress those who are not part of their bloc.

### **The Dictator**

Le Bon (1960) contends that leaders of crowds are men of action rather than thinking, he describes some of their characteristics,



The intensity of their faith gives great power of suggestion to their words. The multitude is always ready to listen to the strong-willed man, who knows how to impose himself upon it. Men gathered in a crowd lose force of will, and turn instinctively to the person who possesses the quality they lack. (pp. 118–119)

Buzz Windrip possesses these traits. He is a man of action whose discourse is brief and wastes no time in addressing the desires and illusions of his audience. Doremus is shocked by Buzz's appeal to the public,

It was astonishing. Utterly astonishing. Every one of them seemed... entranced by him. When I told them that he schooled the Senate in how to catch catfish while drinking huge amounts of corn whiskey, and that he performed a hornpipe jig in front of the faculty at Yale, their admiration for him only increased! (Taccone & Cohen, 2016, p. 34)

Being a man of action, Buzz wastes no time and gives the shortest inauguration speech in history:

My fellow Americans, as President of the United States of America, I want to inform you that the *real* New Deal has started right this minute, and we're all going to enjoy the manifold liberties to which our history entitles us—and have a whale of a good time doing it! I thank you. (Taccone & Cohen, 2016, p.44)

Unlike the masochistic and submissive character described earlier, the authoritarian personality, according to Fromm (1960), has sadistic tendencies. One of such tendencies tends “to make others dependent on oneself and to have absolute and unrestricted power over them, so as to make them nothing but instruments” (122). In addition, Fromm (1960) believes that:

In authoritarian philosophy the concept of equality does not exist. The authoritarian character may sometimes use the word equality either conventionally or because it suits his purposes. But it has no real

meaning or weight for him, since it concerns something outside the reach of his emotional experience.. For him the world is composed of people with power and those without it, of superior ones and inferior ones. On the basis of his sado-masochistic strivings, he experiences only domination or submission, but never solidarity. (p.149)

Buzz's conduct is a clear example of such philosophy; once he acquires the position of power he starts to practice his full authority without regard to the public. In fact his actions are directed toward marginalizing civil liberties and imposing censorship upon the crowd,

BUZZ: In addition, I am, by Executive Order, authorizing the Minutemen to serve as an armed militia. These brave men and women, now numbering 500,000 strong, will keep our borders safe and stand at the ready to attack our enemies.

and,

My fellow countrymen, as of 9:25 this evening, I have declared a state of martial law. The proclamation of martial law is not a military takeover. It is a power embedded in the Constitution to protect our republic whenever confronted by the danger of a violent overthrow. Such a danger now confronts us. New information out of Mexico and from within our own country bears proof of seditious activities that we must move to crush. By implementing martial law we take all necessary steps to protect our streets and every citizen of this great nation. (Taccone & Cohen, 2016, p.45 & 52)

Doremus realizes ahead of time that the country is actually witnessing the rise of dictatorship, but under the pressure of the crowd his realization is undermined to mere journalistic criticism. After hearing Buzz's speech he writes a bold editorial in spite of the objections of his family. He is brave enough to step out of the crowd and announce his opposition to Buzz and his authoritarianism,

a darkness like no other descends on my hometown. The air, once light with promise, is now thick with fear. ... You, sir, are to blame for this. You and your ever-growing legion of Minute Men, those mercenary pirates who stand ready for your every new command to terrorize us. They roam the streets like drunken bullies, happy to intimidate anyone unlucky enough to cross their path, and hungry to beat up anyone who objects. (Taccone & Cohen, 2016, p. 52)

Doremus represents the odd section of the crowd that does not surrender its independency and individual freedom of thinking. In his editorial, he announces, "I reject you as my President, Mr. Windrip. I reject you as the man who represents the United States of America" (Taccone & Cohen, 2016, p. 53). Therefore, he has to be punished both by the system as well as the crowd. The 'Minute Men' come to arrest him and the charge is of course high treason. Shad Ledue, now a member of this fascist faction, is convinced that he "deserves lynching" ((Taccone & Cohen, 2016, p. 54). Le Bon (1960) believes that "A crowd is not merely impulsive and mobile. Like a savage, it is not prepared to admit that anything can come between its desire and the realization of its desire (p.38). Also, MacWilliams (2016) asserts, "Authoritarians obey. They rally to and follow strong leaders. And they respond aggressively to outsiders, especially when they feel threatened." Windrip plays directly to authoritarian inclinations. Shad is the embodiment of Le Bon's and MacWilliams's ideas; he rejects and suppresses anyone who stands between him and his desire to be part of the crowd following Windrip. Shad is the 'real American' who is the perfect representation of Buzz's "New Order" ((Taccone & Cohen, 2016, p. 54). Swan, a military judge, describes him saying, "You see there, Ledue! Courage! Mixed with a rapacious intelligence and just a hint of defiance" ((Taccone & Cohen, 2016, pp. 54-55). While Doremus, according to Swan, is not 'American' enough and it is clear from his last

name ‘Jessup’ whose etymology is ‘Yosef.’ Swan, says, “Isn’t it astonishing that Jessup, a name from ancient Canaan, could transform itself some thousands of years later into purebred, Protestant, New England stock! Still and all, an unfortunate lineage to be a part of at this historical moment” ((Taccone & Cohen, 2016, p. 55). Windrip’s administration re-defined what it means to be an ‘American’ according to its ‘New Order’ of things. Whoever that does not fit into the new criteria is either killed or sent to a concentration camp. The end of Act 3 witnesses the murder of Dr. Fowler, Doremus’s son-in-law, at the hands of the Buzz’s guards. He tries to defend Doremus in the courtroom, but he is dragged outside and shot dead. Buzz emerges as a typical dictator whom the crowd follows blindly. Witnessing this horrible act, Doremus has to save himself as well as his family by serving under the new editor writing propaganda in support of the Windrip Administration.

In the second part of the play; however, Doremus joins the underground resistance, “New Underground,” (Taccone & Cohen, 2016, p. 73) to Windrip’s rule. But he is eventually arrested and is sentenced to 25 years in a concentration camp, and later escapes to Canada. Doremus represents the journalism that stands as a barricade against tyranny. The second part of the play emphasizes the importance of independent journalism and the danger of state-controlled propaganda. The ‘New Underground’ has four journalistic divisions to support its cause, “printing propaganda, distributing it, exchanging suppressed news stories, and smuggling suspects into Mexico and Canada” (Taccone & Cohen, 2016, p. 77). As the play progresses, a coup ousts Windrip and the nation dives into anarchy. The dictator is no longer present and his deputy assumes his office to practice the oppression against that part of the crowd that does not follow him. The crowd easily shifts its loyalty

and submission from one dictator to another. The explanation for this change of allegiance is easy enough,

The hero whom the crowd acclaimed yesterday is insulted today should he have been undertaken by failure. ... The crowd in this case considers the fallen hero as an equal, and takes its revenge for having bowed to a superiority whose existence it no longer admits. (Le Bon, 1960, p. 139)

The play ends with the two opposing sides struggling to promote their conflicting agendas. The fight is a real one as long as there are crowds who are willing to embrace authoritarianism.

### **Conclusion**

Donald Trump's election on November 8, 2016, shocked many people in the U.S. and around the globe. Interpreting his popularity varies, but the idea of authoritarianism, or the authoritarian personality is among the most widely accepted. A body of scholarship and literature has been produced as a reaction to this perplexing election. The theatrical adaptation of Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here* is only one example of the reaction to the election of president Trump. The play carries great resemblance to the political frenzy just before and after the 2016 elections. It highlights the threats of populist leaders who exploit social dissatisfaction to manipulate public opinion and destabilize the traditional political foundations of the nation. In order to understand the leanings and motives of the American electorate, as represented in the play, and the authoritarian agenda and personality theories of Fromm and Le Bon has been used. The opposite of the authoritarian philosophy is the democratic agenda represented by Doremus and his small group. They believe in the constitution and freedom of press which have been trashed by Windrip. This group gives a hopeful note to the end of the play as they struggle to undermine authoritarianism.

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