

# A World Unplugged

## Fractal fascism and the global psychopolitics of cruelty in late capitalism

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In 2023, the Lancet–World Psychiatric Association Commission warned of a silent yet escalating mental health crisis—depression rates had soared, not only due to biomedical causes, but as responses to chronic disempowerment, sociopolitical disintegration, and the breakdown of shared symbolic structures (1). Against this backdrop, the March 2025 issue of *Lancet Psychiatry* called on President Trump to reconsider the psychological consequences of his early executive actions in first 100 days—including the 80% defunding of the World Health Organization (WHO) and further liberalisation of arms control (2).

But cruelty is rarely abstract. While *The Lancet Psychiatry* reflected on the first 100 days of Trump's second presidency, *The Lancet* carried another story of 100 days—a letter from Nigeria, opening with a bleak yet powerful line: “Nigeria's premier teaching hospital—University College Hospital, Ibadan—has endured over 100 days without electricity...”(3) The crisis, we learn, was not due to war or natural disaster, but a debt of roughly \$258,000 to the Ibadan Electricity Distribution Company (IBEDC)—an astonishingly low sum for a calamity so severe. This institutionalised cruelty is just one example of capital's indifference. But this blackout is more than local—it mirrors a global pattern of neglect. Imagine, if you will, a hospital plunged into darkness for over 100 days.

On its website, IBEDC presents itself as a customer-oriented, high-performance utility company that values “open communication” and “unity.” Yet one must ask: how and among whom did this “open communication” function when a hospital remained in darkness for over three months? And when the company speaks of “unity,” is it referring to solidarity among people—or the consolidation of capital?

The power outage in Ibadan is not just a local infrastructure failure—it is the material echo of global psychopolitics. During the COVID-19 pandemic, U.S. President Donald Trump accused the

WHO of favouring China and undermining U.S. interests. Though Biden reversed Trump's initial attempt to withdraw, Trump's return to office in 2025 marked a renewed attack: one of his first acts was to slash U.S. funding to the WHO by 80%, a move which jeopardised support for programs including HIV, malaria, and childhood immunisation in Nigeria (4).

The decision to drastically reduce funding to the WHO, particularly following the organisation's favourable assessments of China's pandemic response and its criticisms of the U.S., invites psychological reflection as much as political analysis. From a psychoanalytic perspective, such actions evoke the contours of a narcissistic injury—where the leader's idealised image of national and personal grandiosity comes into conflict with an external narrative that fails to affirm it. In this context, the defunding move appears less a strategic adjustment than a psychic reaction, marked by primitive defences such as projection, withdrawal, and omnipotent reversal. What unfolds on the global stage, then, is not merely a geopolitical dispute, but a psychological case shaped by the unconscious need to defend against perceived humiliation and loss of control.

In our clinical practice, we recognise this process: the subject, unable to symbolise frustration, locates the persecutory object outside and attacks it. Here, the WHO became the scapegoat, and as a consequence, hospitals were left in darkness—both literal and structurally.

These authoritarian tendencies are no longer Agamben's ‘state of exception’(5) but signal a broader transformation of political subjectivity. The reactivation of collective narcissism like before the World War II—defined by the idealisation of the ingroup and intense resentment toward outgroups—finds fertile ground in late capitalist disintegration (6). The symbolic ego-ideals that once mediated social cohesion collapse, and what arises instead are fantasies of restoration, purification,

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and grandeur. Drawing from Melanie Klein, we can say that persecutory anxieties and projective mechanisms dominate public discourse in times of uncertainty. Paranoid-schizoid defenses re-emerge, such as fragmentation, idealization of the self, devaluation of the other and retreat into authoritarian structures that promise control (7).

As Noëlle McAfee writes in *Interpreting the Fractal Nature of Social Experience*, social structures tend to reproduce themselves at every scale. The concept of 'fractal fascism', as theorised by her (8), describes how these authoritarian patterns replicate not only in state governance but in classrooms, family dinners, WhatsApp groups, and professional boards. Fractal fascism is the diffusion of authoritarian power into the intimate spaces of social life. It is ambient, distributed, and intimate.

The tragedy is not simply the rise of narcissistic leaders, but our increasing identification with them. As Freud noted in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (9), the crowd suspends its critical function by merging its ego-ideal with the leader. This libidinal economy makes cruelty banal, even celebrated—especially when directed toward the devalued other. And yet, as Hannah Arendt warned, the banality of evil lies precisely in this structural dissociation (10). In this late capitalist age, the Enlightenment ideals forged through centuries of human struggle—equality, freedom, fraternity, and, above all, justice no longer structure our symbolic order—they linger only as ghosts of a collective dream now disavowed. What is framed as administrative necessity—like cutting power to a hospital—masks the quiet devastation it brings: Human suffering and psychological trauma pushed beyond the reach of visibility or accountability. Such disavowal is central to neoliberal governance,

which replaces ethical responsibility with metrics, contracts, and market logic.

Mental health professionals are now treating the psychic aftershocks of this collective pathology. Depression emerges not merely from internal conflict, but from a collapse in the capacity to symbolise hope for a meaningful life. Late capitalism exploits not only labour but also fantasy and attachment, it depletes hope (11)... Despair is not a side effect—it is a governing strategy.

The true horror of our time may not be spectacular violence, but its fractal repetition—structurally minor cruelties playing out in endless variation. Fractal fascism describes the diffusion of authoritarianism into the micro-relationships of everyday life. The task, then, is to track how these macro-level defences are internalised, how the subject comes to collude with power through misrecognition, and how the capacity to symbolise suffering might be restored. To resist it, we must begin by recognising it—first in states, institutions and all the societal structures then in ourselves. For clinicians, the call is clear: protect the values of care—justice, equality, transparency, and solidarity—everywhere they are under threat, including within us. Now is the time for mental health professionals to act—not only to treat suffering, but to oppose the structures that produce it. We must defend the ethics of care in all directions: from policy to practice, from system to soul!

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