



Speculations on Authoritarianism and Narcissism as Political Concepts

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At the outset I must distinguish between *pre-feudal* societies (what Max Weber calls patrimonial societies), where social loyalties evolved out of the extended family, and *feudal* societies, which started as larger social groupings where loyalties were based on (and in some ways substituted for) familial loyalties - e.g. "the king is father to his people." Feudal societies, in contrast to preceding patrimonial societies, contain bureaucratic elements (e.g. tax collecting) and loom ever greater over time. *Post-feudal* societies limit the range of influence of bureaucratic ways of structuring society, and use bureaucratic techniques reflexively to limit the sway of social hierarchy, as an institutionalization of checks and balances in society. While post-feudal societies are more bureaucratic in that they rely on the formality of law rather than the informality of custom, they also limit authority procedurally by holding elections. Limits to bureaucratic domination over society is built into the constitutional framework of government in order to preserve a modicum of democratic liberty.

Mixed cases - most modern societies contain aspects of all 3 types - can be viewed as transitional in a social evolutionary sense. There obviously are modern societies where traditions of family loyalties continue to influence an increasingly complex polity, and there are post-feudal societies where loyalty to, and identification with, leaders (an authoritarian way to reduce anxiety) are stronger than the value of rational self-interest. Such self-interest (sometimes taking the form of social class loyalties) also can wax stronger than moral values of the civic republican sort, which tend to fade as a source of social values as a society becomes more diverse and anonymous. At this high point in technological development, and with growing population, it becomes clear that no such society can remain cohesive through reliance on personal relationships and networks alone.

Modern (post-feudal) societies devise different mixtures of regulatory principles that cumulatively produce radically contrasting balances between individual freedom and social justice. Some societies emphasize social order governed by social structures that are outgrowths (and then the reinforcers) of aristocratic-like social power; other societies emphasize order governed by social structures based on individual self-interest (liberal societies); and still other societies emphasize order governed by social structures that are the result of adherence to cultural norms with a strongly moral component (e.g., civic republican-based societies). The family-oriented solidarity of patrimonial societies generates the social extremes of hospitality to strangers and constant wars between tribes. Feudal societies generate chivalry (highly porous and selective in practice) by elites, modeled on a patriarch's concern for his children. Even as and when feudal members

begin to develop traits of individualism, they continue to believe that only relationships with social equals in the hierarchy serve any social benefit.

Individualism in a post-feudal society, such as the USA, originally reflected a religious belief that everyone is equal before God, an unintentionally subversive weakening of social hierarchy for essentially moral reasons. But, as Erich Fromm and others noted, today this early egalitarian orientation increasingly includes a beady-eyed narcissistic belief that one should be open to others only because you can never know who may benefit you. Any unuseful new acquaintances can be safely dumped later on, unless one has rare religious-moralistic objections to behaving so instrumentally. And even this kind of qualm is considered more an individual prerogative than a social norm.

One way to illuminate the evolution of social solidarity in pre-feudal, feudal, and post-feudal societies is to explore what people share emotionally through everyday interactions. Pre-feudal societies, stemming from tribal groupings, share a common knowledge and emotional base that shape loyalties that are taken for granted. Communication is based on repeated social interactions that forms into customs and rituals that reinforce social solidarity, sustain shared values, and arouse common feelings. The need to produce an emotionally-desired result produces *talking at* people to fulfill a ritual rather than merely *talking with* people to gain useful new knowledge. Communication here is largely geared to enable members emotionally to fit in.

In feudal societies the existence of permanent power differentials based on social status (no longer familial ones that assumes social solidarity and social responsibilities of superiors for inferiors) means that *talking at* people takes for granted different and opposed class interests. The emotional life of poor people in these societies is oriented around playing-up to their status superiors upon whom they are usually dependent, while a great deal of the emotional life of rich people is based on patronizing the poor without offering more than minimal help, since only a few rich eccentrics are confident of being able to do so without damaging their own interests.

In post-feudal societies the proliferation of opportunities for social advancement for the many, instead of just a few, means that most socializing is based on seeking out and building new relationships (often superficial) in order to obtain useful information, which is why communication is often *talking with* people. This differs from communication in feudalistic societies which produces primarily an emotionally-expressive effect, as in appealing to and gratifying the vanity of whichever person is of higher status in a given interaction. Thus, conciliatoriness is here more important than gaining information for use later in personal opportunities since there are so few of them.

The feudal status consciousness is of a decidedly defensive sort, while in post-feudal societies there is greater latitude for social climbing. Communication is intended to exchange useful information to concoct transient emotional bonds (though the hope is sometimes for something long lasting, as in a romantic relationship) so as to implement personal advancement strategies. Nevertheless, the price of endless shallow hit-and-run socializing is that relationships of greater emotional depth are elusive. To the extent that

bureaucratic environments encourage image-management manipulation, *identifications with* people will be replaced by *identifications at* people (competitively performed) since rituals of status replace communication between social equals, with its characteristic ideal concerns for sincerity and accuracy. Some classic writings, in addition to Fromm, that analyzed these developments in American society are Riesman, Glazer, and Denney (2020 rev. ed.), and Lasch (2018).

As for modal personality types arising from these kind of interactions, hysterical personalities of the sort bent on "fitting-in" are likely to be common in pre-feudal societies. Paranoia, unjustified as well as justified, appears in feudal societies because of acute class tensions and conflicts of interests resulting in exploitation both of an economic and an emotional (demeaning of social inferiors) sort. Because of great social distances between people in competition in post-feudal societies, narcissism among the socially powerful is all too common, and schizophrenia among the powerless, is a real danger as an extreme psychological "exit". This is not to say the proportions of personality types are the same in each of the three social environments. The hysterical in pre-feudal societies and the paranoid in feudal societies (plus the neurotics, alternating with hysteria, since emotional repression is a survival necessity in feudal societies) are possibly better examples of society-centered maladies than is schizophrenia in post-feudal societies - which ironically is the extreme result of lack of integration of the person at crucial formative moments in early family life. Sociopathic personalities, borderline personalities, and narcissistic personalities all experience society as less of a home and more like a prison that requires constant vigilance, deceit and wariness to survive in.

Hysterics may well have constituted a greater proportion of the society in pre-feudal societies than are the paranoid in feudal societies or schizophrenics (however nebulously defined) in post-feudal societies. Neurotics of various types will reflect modes of tension management made necessary because of emotional repression. (Regarding broad typologies two books that I find illuminating are McWilliams (2011) and Johnson (1994).] Dysfunctions in the development of personal rationality can be conceived of as dysfunctions in desire (id), in the function of will (ego + superego), and in the functioning of resulting behavior (action, partly molded by habit). Emotional satisfaction as the innate certainty of solidarity in social relationships declines with social evolution; consequently, social astuteness as a defense against social manipulation increases as a necessity. Of course, there are middle positions that can produce a relatively healthy social solidarity, despite the unstable circumstances. Understanding such social options is what led sociologist Max Weber to define social class position as based on the probability of having a certain kind of life with certain kinds of typical occurrences.

Perversions reflect the breakdown of a healthy sense of self because of feelings of personal weakness and lack of belief in one's ability to accomplish anything worthwhile. People whose identity derives solely from ascribed status, especially when ascribed status no longer can be relied on, feel hopelessly trapped and threatened. Narcissists in collectivistic societies claim to be loyal but inwardly manipulate the credulity of others to meet their own, often perverse desires, which is the classical feature of totalitarian

leaders. Less extreme narcissistic cases often sublimate thwarted desire to gain status by embracing an exaggerated “nationalism.”

On the other hand, becoming an extreme narcissist, and even a sociopath, in an individualistic society, even when one has an achieved status, reflects a breakdown or the aborting of a healthy self because of the stresses of endemic competition. Thus, narcissists in individualistic societies boast that they enjoy the competition but inwardly seek to “game” the system because what they want from victory (fulfillment of rather perverse desires) is more than the system is set up to provide. In contrast, there likely are authoritarians in individualistic societies who accede to this competition but inwardly wish they would be competing in the service of more meaningful objectives.

Situations between purely ascribed status and purely achieved status tend to blend the inheritance of social connections with an objective proving of one’s abilities. These conflicting influences are reflected in social relationships, including the search for security in social relationships idealized as freely chosen, such as marriage, but are really a clinging to sources of one’s social status, etc. Collectivistic authoritarian societies survive by accentuating the fulfillment of values as well by providing security, within accustomed parameters of social inequalities. Individualistic societies succeed by accentuating self-fulfillment as well as the meeting of idiosyncratic personal needs, especially when the complexity of social structure has reached a point that a wide array of individual differences in personality result.

Extreme authoritarians often tend to be envious, acutely aware of others in this negative sense, while extreme narcissists tend to be indifferent to others. People also fluctuate between these two extremes because their personalities have not stabilized for whatever reason, be it the way they were raised, the effects of their environment in childhood or in the present, or a combination of all of these factors, and others. They may react with envy or indifference to the plight of an acquaintance according to their internal emotional state at that moment, or because of social cues that arouse what they consider to be appropriate social roles.

Authoritarian and narcissistic personalities admittedly do evince a certain commonality in reacting to stress in a defensive manner. Authoritarian personalities in hierarchical societies scapegoat lower status members and “outsiders” because confronting the pressures produced by high status community members is not feasible, and is a matter of shame if conscious. Narcissistic personalities, if from high status groups, can enjoy the pleasures of vanity, and usually only quarrel with others of like status when they come under severe pressure, or when lower status people suddenly become aggressive and no longer deferential. Obviously, there are situations where authoritarians rationally react to legitimate threat.

The cultural justification for high level authoritarianism, in a best case scenario, is that it produces social solidarity because it enforces moral values and ensures security. Typical psychological defenses resorted to by authoritarian personalities are repression, projection, and in more extreme cases, paranoia. The cultural justification for

individualism to the point of narcissism is that it offers creativity-enhancing values as well as opportunities for removing barriers to self-actualization, which not everyone has the resources to avail of. The familiar psychological defenses widely engaged in by narcissistic personalities are sublimation, intellectualization, and displacement.

The danger of what religious people call idolatry in primitive societies heightens where communal solidarity is on the wane and wishful thinking and primitive magic is projected unto the spiritual world. This can produce greed, lust, and many kinds of wishful thinking exacerbated by paranoia. Here communal structures cannot contain the tensions caused by the weakening of communal and even familial solidarity. The danger of nihilism in post-feudal, societies is based less on projecting greed and lust unto the spiritual world (though it occurs) so much as projecting them, together with all kinds of intellectual fads (our version of magic spells) unto the social realm that substitutes for the spiritual realm, which is treated as if it doesn't exist. The result is that absurd social loyalties and cultural fads, often fantasy-driven, may substitute for morally-informed loyalties and thoughtful cultural values.

In *Gemeinschaft* (community-based) societies intense personal relationships are reinforced by formalities and even ritualism, though the degree is strongly influenced by the particular culture. In *Gesellschaft* (association-based) societies personal relationships are reinforced by fewer formalities and ritualism, with the market elected as the best guarantee of preventing exploitation in what otherwise would be potentially close personal relationships, but under these circumstances won't be. The business world of formal, sometimes short-term, contracts is the apex in *Gesellschaft* tendencies toward extreme formality.

In *Gesellschaft* societies families are united by formalities leading to loyalties, so that they remain an island of security amidst friendships that tend to be informal in order to allow a certain amount of emotional expressiveness. By the same token these relationships cannot withstand a great deal of stress, including "being out of sight, out of mind" such as when careers require physical relocation. The classic book in modern social theory of distinguishing in an evolutionary sense between *Gemeinschafts* (communities) and *Gesellschafts* (associations) is Tönnies (2011). The key distinction Tönnies made is between communities displaying social solidarity, mutual concern, and common culture resulting in voluntary adherence to communal custom, and associations where individualism is prized and contractual relations reign supreme. The characteristic feelings of communities often take on religious connotations, while the characteristic feelings of associations tend to be secular.

The *Gesellschafts* of industrial societies reveal the effects of historic trajectories. In Europe the remnants of ascribed social identities coexist with modern ones, which results in relatively strong authoritarian loyalties (relatively informal and intimate in the family, and formal and bureaucratic and status-driven on the job). Americans achieved social identities, inescapably through market competitions which have a relatively irrational and anarchistic quality to them. Nevertheless, these identities are stabilized by formal contracts, outside of the "Home in a Heartless World" family as an ideal as an

island of personal stability based on authoritarian loyalty. Authoritarian loyalties and narcissistic longings (and seeking of sympathy and of intimate understandings of one's fate) combine in complex forms in the modern family, especially in societies like America where authoritarian traditions in society at large (forgetting for the moment unique subcultures) are relatively weak.

Political and Social Repercussions

One might conjecture with some cause that American society is based on commerce-based and politics-based negotiations as opposed to a social engineering model evident in a modernized Europe built on a status-seeking model for social relationships other than the most intimate ones. Because authoritarian societies do not encourage acquaintanceships (unlike America) friendships may be kept for life, but it is especially difficult in those societies for people to make new friendships after childhood.

In Europe this has consequences after one becomes enveloped in bureaucratic structures and resulting relationships on the job, which for adults becomes a formative part of their social world, though admittedly not a particularly intimate one. They may long for intimate social relationships, perversely accentuated by the cultural industries but which they have few opportunities to achieve. Instead, they dream of intimate relationships through idealizations of the past or hoped-for future, again as offered by cultural industries.. Turning acquaintanceships into friendships, that American ideal, is often considered beyond the realm of possibility. The compensatory result is usually an embrace of a form of nationalism. As Myszta describes the evolution from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*:¹

At the same time, however, the sociological vision of the great transformation, which is described as the movement from informal, face-to-face, homogeneous, communal and spontaneous types of relationships to the formal, heterogeneous, national, contract-based, calculative types of relations, has always looked nostalgically at informality.... The integration of pre-modern society is presented as guarded by conformity to tradition and customs [their version of formality], and by informal control exercised by the community, while the integration of a modern society is perceived as the result of differentiation, individualization, rationalization, expansion of formalistic, depersonalized rules and the move towards impersonality in the exercise of power.

The history of the institutionalization of social relationships is the evolution from strong bonds into ones that are widely diffused, such as into loyalty to the nation, and perhaps toward a general sympathy for humanity at large. Paradoxically, immediate loyalties to the family and community reflects actual social interactions that reinforce social ties, and can yield a diluted version regarding the outside world where loyalty takes pride of place. Again, the result can be a strong form of nationalism.

The diffuse social ties of modern societies result in a desire for more intense

¹ Myszta, 2000, p. 19.

“authentic” relationships that result in a longing for more freely-chosen, romantic pair-bonds than can be achieved, or that can be achieved only in the realm of fantasy, as facilitated by the entertainment industry. The chief political container of such longing for “authentic” relationships in the overall community, is nationalism when the state as a whole is recast as such a community.

In *Gemeinschaft* societies loyalties and social solidarity built around ritual occasions result in a sense of awe aimed at communal ideals, produced on heightened occasions. In *Gesellschaft* societies this phenomenon has been replaced by symmetrical obligations governed by rules so that, in effect, formal education produced cultural ideal for who are instrumentally rational in handling things, and non-instrumentally honest in an emotionally expressive way in their dealings with each other, a golden mean that many people do not achieve.

One person who reckons that evolution from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft* has not occurred smoothly is Rollo May who in *Love and Will* makes the point, regarding the modernization of American society, that external anxiety and guilt may have lessened over time, but internal anxiety and guilt (from ambivalence and overall lack of integration of self) have increased. May laments the dysfunctions of an increasingly narcissistic society. He distinguishes between wishing, such as wanting a candy bar, and willing, such as emotionally reacting to this wish, perhaps by denying that one likes candy. He writes: “Detachment and psychopathic acting out are the two opposite ways to escape confronting the impact of one’s intentionality, the former being the method of the intellectualizing compulsive-obsessional type and the latter being the method of the infantile, psychopathic type.”² The neurotic American who is forever sublimating his or her feelings and not acting on them directly is the first type, the more modern (some would say postmodern) American who accepts his own narcissism with little or no guilt embodies the second type.

The inhabitants of modernizing societies are characterized by endless schemes for social advancement measured by economic growth and, in a later stage, based on exploiting bureaucratic opportunities by “gaming the system” by engaging in image-management more than true competency, and which often results in the society taking “rational choice” models for social change to an *ad absurdum* end. Extremes of workaholism become counterbalanced by grim devotion to recreation as a main mode of tension release, as if these two poles can substitute for the kind of balanced life that Rollo May is imploring people to live.

So modernizing authoritarian societies become generators of hysterical people who favor mindless fitting in at all cost - termed "loyalty". They no longer aim even to attain the veneer of social justice. Tension release takes the form of scapegoating outsiders and/or the powerless. In sum, fantasies become necessary substitutes for a well-balanced life, especially in one’s emotional life. The dysfunctions of authoritarian societies tend to revolve around the hysterias common to lack of fulfillment in personal

² May, 1969, p. 260.

relationships, between neighbors, between friends, and in the intimacies of the family. To the extent that these societies are hierarchical these dysfunctional relationships are often colored by sado-masochistic tendencies displayed by authoritarian followers incapable of confronting - though they are capable of unrealistically adoring - narcissistic leaders. Dysfunctions within narcissistic societies reflect the escapism of people who have weak social ties and seek to achieve through fantasy-filled romantic longings personal relationships that are no longer likely, or through addictions or perhaps through workaholicism (especially for the middle class), and so avoid addressing what is missing in their lives in an holistic sense.

The rationale that justifies post-feudal societies is that they have evolved out of communal entities and that they carry on many of the gratifying intimate qualities found in *Gemeinschaft* communities, though this is wishful thinking. The anxieties of everyday life are buffered by social relationships, but when these relationships falter or fail, the result is not the loving concern of the family as in a collectivistic society but often a clinging that can develop into sado-masochistic tendencies in the authoritarian social environment, or into dependence on addictions (rather than the untrusted goodwill of people) in the narcissistic social environment.

The split personality in modern societies is where the tensions and lack of fulfillment of *Gesellschaft* values expresses frustrations in a dangerous way. Certain aspirant intellectuals of Central and Eastern Europe dreamed of transforming national communities into grand extended families, with the state operating as the expression of the community, but have never really succeeded except as an outlet for radical politics that later proved malignant.

What often results from nationalism is a “having your cake and eating it too” phenomenon, such as solving deficits in self-esteem by advocating pride based not on achievement but on hereditary loyalties. Acts of sadism are approved that otherwise would have been taboo, resulting in scapegoating of social outsiders. This process is often initiated by authoritarian-driven nihilism (with no reference to values other than the hereditary social order), which sometimes is in political competition with narcissism-driven nihilism (with no reference to any values other than hedonism, or at best minding your own business).

Authoritarian nihilism obviously is a danger in modern societies. Narcissistic nihilism is more a danger in a society such as the U.S. where social distance is supposedly the all-purpose solution for social tensions (an inheritance from British culture). Also, “minding your own business” depends on a level of emotional repression that requires so much energy that under stressful conditions it is sometimes unsustainable, so that a rebound effect is possible resulting in individual, but under certain conditions mass, hysteria. The golden mean is a *Gemeinschaft* that allows a place for *Gesellschaft* virtues based on self-control in the service of universal morality, or coming from the opposite direction, a *Gesellschaft* that still has a place for *Gemeinschaft* virtues (based on universal morality) sustained by the emotional satisfactions from gratifying experiences with real people, so that there is pleasure in private life as well as

in duty in public life. The devils of all these speculations, of course, are in the details.

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