



Displacement and the Rise of Left and Right Authoritarian States of Mind

Ilene Philipson

In 1895 Sigmund Freud coined the term “displacement” in *The Interpretations of Dreams*. What he meant by this was the unconscious redirection of negative feelings –rage, fear, anxiety – from the true object of their intent to safer, less destabilizing ones. As a simple example, a child displaces his anger and hostility from his father, whom he fears or feels responsible for, to his younger brother and ends up taunting and berating that brother for reasons that appear uncalled for or even confusing to him.

What I wish to argue in this paper is that a form of displacement is operating increasingly on a societal level, redirecting feelings of rage, fear and anxiety away from the neoliberal social order to objects that are affectively compelling but that do not challenge the foundations of real power. Both the ideological Left and Right are engaged in the social construction of explanations for what so many of us see as social and political breakdown. I use the concept of displacement for this process not in the traditional Freudian sense wherein intrapsychic conflict is responsible. Rather, I view individuals today as deeply confused over the economic, social, and political worlds they inhabit. They turn to what is currently available in their ideological landscapes for meaning and understanding, and it is in that turning they encounter ideologies of displacement.

To find our way in a society that appears increasingly chaotic, complex and polarized, individuals absorb what is being offered by thinkers and politicians embedded in a deeply divided political environment: from the Right, our fear and anger are directed to the coastal elites, the deep state, and Critical Race Theory, and from the Left to systemic racism and transphobia. Rage against these objects provides us with the ability to channel our most negative feelings, but because these objects remain so broad, largely symbolic, and/or ill-defined, there are no real solutions offered for their elimination. Rather, they serve as steadfast containers for our fear and rage, and also serve as the underpinnings around which the likeminded can form ideological groupings. Those on the Right experience a sense of belonging and community in a mutual hatred of liberals and the Left, and those on the Left in their critique and repudiation of systemic racism. Given that each is founded upon objection and antipathy, neither provides concrete solutions nor a vision of the future. “Make America Great Again” and “social justice” are abstract goals that do not offer a vision of what a better society would actually look like.

Notes from My Consulting Room

I have been working with Renee for 9 years. She originally came to me to discuss problems in her marriage. Her husband to whom she had been married for 14 years had been in and out of jobs as a project manager, often leaving them for somewhat obscure reasons: he didn’t like his supervisor; he felt unchallenged or underutilized. Over time it became

harder and harder for him to find work. Over the first two years I saw Renee, her husband had begun spending more time at home, often vaping and playing video games while he sought new employment. Renee increasingly became enraged, yelling at him in front of their two teenage children, threatening to divorce him, and coming to me knowing that she should separate from him but anxious about becoming a single mother. When she arrived home early from her job as an ER nurse one day, she discovered him vaping with their 14 year old son. That was it. He was out. He moved to the Midwest to live with his elderly parents and that is the last she or her children have heard from him.

In the past 7 years, Renee has grappled with extreme loneliness, financial insecurity, and incredulity about the ways in which her job has changed. Since the last surge of Covid, as an ER nurse, Renee describes how her work has switched from placing Covid patients on respirators to trying to save the lives of gunshot victims wounded on our city streets. She tells me: “it’s like a warzone. Sometimes two, three at a time. They’re like 15, 16. Why is this happening? Why can’t anyone stop this!!” Her precarious family life now is somehow mirrored in the emergency room in which she works. Nothing is how she imagined middle age to be for her.

Last year, Renee told me she had to cancel her appointment for the following week. She and a girlfriend were going to drive for six hours to attend a Trump rally. I looked surprised. Renee had never discussed politics with me, and certainly never mentioned she was a Trump supporter. “You didn’t know that?” she asked in surprise. “What else is there? Please don’t tell me you’re for that dishrag Biden! Things have got to change. We can’t go on like this. If you saw what I saw everyday you’d understand that. You want your kid to end up with a bullet in his head?”

Josh was referred to me due to problems in writing his dissertation. As a former academic, I often receive such referrals. Josh was in his seventh year in the humanities and revealed on our first visit that his so-called problem with writing was an understatement. He actually had written only three pages in the last two years and his financial support from the university was ending. Quite frankly, most of my referrals for dissertation problems have emanated from the humanities. There are really no jobs given the oversupply of humanities PhDs, and procrastination often is a common defense against the fear of graduating into a hopeless job market.

But Josh was not interested in discussing this. What interested him most and filled our hours together was his outrage over what he saw as transphobia everywhere on campus. Although Josh identified himself as straight, many of his friends were trans or non-binary, and he just couldn’t believe the slights, the harms they were enduring. This came to a head when a trans-identified professor was denied tenure. Josh became one of the leaders of a student-led movement to overturn this tenure decision. When I asked Josh on numerous occasions whether talking about this was the best use of his time with me, he replied that his concerns about his dissertation were petty compared to the injustices of what was occurring on campus.

I site these two clinical examples to illustrate both how unconscious displacement occurs and how it can find its object in the political. Renee is experiencing the fragmentation of family life, economic precarity, and the carnage of increasing gun violence on our city streets. She turns to Trump as the answer. He tells us: “For four straight years, I kept America safe. I kept Israel safe. I kept Ukraine safe, and kept the entire world safe” (NYT 1/13/24). He believes that our country has fallen apart due to “radical left-liberal extremists” such as Kamala Harris. He doesn’t indict the capitalist billionaires such as himself whose corporate interests control the economy, but instead blames immigrants, leftists, and Nancy Pelosi for societal breakdown. He enables Renee to channel her despair, confusion and anger onto a nebulous goal, that of making America great again.

Josh, on the other hand, is facing unemployment, loss of identity as an aspiring academic, and financial uncertainty. He refuses to discuss any of this but rather is caught up in moral outrage at transphobia and the TERFs behind it on his university campus. He displaces his fear and anger onto an object that he has been immersed in and has studied since he was an undergraduate, that is, discrimination against what is defined by the majority of his humanities faculty as the most marginalized members of society. Identity politics direct him toward condemnation of the attitudes and actions of fellow students and faculty. For him, the larger world of massive economic inequality and precariousness, the world which he will soon have to enter, remains conveniently unseen as he rails against the injustices on his college campus.

The displacement utilized by both Renee and Josh is not conscious, but rather an unconscious defense born out of confusion and a susceptibility to the political ideologies available to them currently. Renee watches Fox news and reads algorithmically curated social media. Josh inhabits an academic world that has been monopolized by postmodern thinking now hegemonic at our elite universities. Each of them, in their own way, is captured by an ideology that provides certitude, an understanding of what is taking place around them, a sense of community, and an emotional haven and form of emotional release.

My Argument

If economic democracy is to be part of our future, we must try to understand the core problem: that Americans seem to like to fight with each other more than they do with the economic powers that rule them.

---Jefferson Cowie, *The Great Exception* (31-2)

Today there is little question that the United States, and much of the West, are facing a poly-crisis caused by the already apparent effects of climate change, astounding levels of income inequality, challenges to democracy across the globe, gun violence, homelessness, increased global instability, and the attendant threat of a renewed nuclear arms race. Meaning making falls upon the individual in our anomic society, bereft of a shared moral order and suffering from a broken ethical ecosystem. There is no religious belief, or cohesive sense of nationalism or patriotism that can any longer serve to bind us together as citizens. Money values have replaced other languages of value. We are severed from each

other more than ever, often finding our only form of community mediated by our devices, our social media, our list serves. By all measures, depression, anxiety, addiction, suicide, loneliness, and in the US, an actual decline in life expectancy, are the results. As George Packer describes in *The Unwinding*:

“If you were born around 1960 or afterward, you have spent your adult life in the vertigo of [the] unwinding. You watched structures that had been in place before your birth collapse like pillars of salt across the vast visible landscape. And other things, harder to see but no less vital in supporting the order of everyday life, changed beyond recognition. . . The void was filled by the default force in American life, organized money” (2013:3).

In the years Packer references, the replacement of the welfare state by an increasingly unregulated market, deindustrialization, globalization, and the triumph of neoliberalism, have all created enormous inequalities in wealth distribution, causing more and more of us to live in states of precarity. The US is now governed by and for the well-being of big business. Instead of private corporations promoting the national interest, neoliberalism allows corporations to use the government for their own ends. Given that consumerism drives economic growth, how much we consume becomes our primary model of what was once termed civic virtue. As Michael Thompson argues, we have experienced a “capitalist cultural revolution that took place from the 1980s through to the present. This has consisted in a systematic penetration of the norms of capitalist commodification into the lifeworld of everyday life” (2022:63).

One might think that directing our discontent, our anxieties and our anger toward the capitalist class would serve as the basis of contemporary political ideologies. But quite the opposite appears to have happened. Rather than targeting actual causes, both the Left and the Right are engaged in a form of politics that displaces our discontent onto emotionally charged narratives. A key example of this is demonstrated in how our bifurcated political landscape is narrativized in respect to accounts of American history.

Coherent narratives provide a floor upon which our sense of individual selfhood and forms of social cohesion rest. For a patient who comes to therapy without being able to see a through-line from childhood to the present, the creation of a developmental narrative provides an understanding, a feeling of “this is who I am, this is how I’ve changed (or not), these are the different parts of me.” For any social grouping, such as an ethnicity or nation state, a similar sense of coherence and stability applies.

If we look at how two public intellectuals, Nikole Hannah-Jones and Christopher Rufo, direct our attention to the origins of our current socio-political moment, we see two horizons of thought, two radically different narratives. Hannah-Jones organized and authored *The 1619 Project*, the intention of which was “to reframe American history by considering what it would mean to regard 1619 as our nation’s birth year,” that is, the year when African slaves first arrived in what would become the United States (Stephens, *NYT*, 10/9/20). On the other hand, Christopher Rufo, in his recent book, *America’s Cultural*

Revolution: How the Radical Left Conquered Everything, defines his goal as revealing the “inner history of America’s cultural revolution” describing how figures such as Herbert Marcuse and Angela Davis “established the disciplines of critical theory, critical praxis, critical pedagogy, and critical race theory” that “devoured the university, the street, the school and the bureaucracy” (2023:3). While acknowledging these authors are describing very different periods in American history, they nonetheless are creating evocative narratives with the intention of influencing how we think about America today. Hannah-Jones’ work is considered by some authorities to be foundational to the Left’s belief that the true story of the founding of the US rests in white supremacy. Christopher Rufo provides the Right with the history of, quite simply, “how the radical left conquered everything.” Each of these contributions can be discussed, debated, and evaluated in terms of its historical scholarship, but these authors’ intent is not so much scholarly as ideological, to provide heft to current political worldviews.

On the basis of these cohering narratives, the individual can find comfort. The world is now understandable, and the chaos around us has discernable origins. Nothing is really caused by accident and there is an accessible historical narrative that explains it all. In fact, the true believer, as someone privy to the illuminating narrative, as having privileged insight into the state of things, can feel superior to those who are not. Because this serves in part as a defense against economic and social precarity, holding dear to these narratives and believing in them as unquestioned truths speak to emotional needs. MAGA supporters on the Right and adherents to social justice movements on the Left, are often righteous in their commitments and intolerant of non-believers. Because so many of these polarizing narratives are founded, in part, in displacement, in the need to escape confusion, fear and anxiety, they are often clung to from an emotional yearning more than a rational assessment or cognitive understanding. I believe that Renee and Josh, and many of my other patients, are examples of this trend.

These narratives also function to bring people together and form communities of belief. As traditional institutions of solidarity and mutual aid such as the family, religion, trade unions, and fraternal organizations have withered, the lone individual faces the cruel fates of an unjust and unequal social order alone. As psychoanalyst Jay Frankel notes, “we have lost our sense that the world will protect us, when we are in danger with no chance of escape” (2002). In today’s political landscape, our affectively polarized worlds offer us people to bond with and people to hate. We have our shared love of Tucker Carlson and Glen Beck on the Right, and Rachel Maddow and Jon Stewart on what passes for the Left. We wear our MAGA hats and our Black Lives Matter tee-shirts. With a sense of common purpose and mutual support, we are fortified against the ravages of the neoliberal order. We are part of a group, a righteous collectivity to change the world, a world that has become too complex, too mired in overwhelming conflict, breakdown and despair to comprehend. In *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, Erich Fromm writes:

“Group narcissism has important functions. In the first place, it furthers the solidarity and cohesion of the group, and makes manipulation easier by appealing to narcissistic prejudices. Secondly, it is extremely important as an element giving

satisfaction to the members of the group and particularly to those who have few other reasons to feel proud and worthwhile. . . There is compensation for one's miserable condition in feeling 'I am part of the most wonderful group in the world'" (1973:23).

Displacement is a defense against psychic overwhelm, the experience of feeling lost and unprotected. Today, as nationalism, patriotism, and organized religion unravel as cohering narratives, people crave means of understanding the world around them. There is a sense that there are external forces outside of individuals' control that nonetheless seem to hold dominion over them. Once a belief in God or the nation state is surrendered, where do we turn? Our current political landscape offers answers that I believe displace our feelings of fear, anxiety and rage onto explanations that miss the target. Both the Left's focus on "systemic racism" and the Right's on "the radical left" turn our attention to issues that are so broad and unspecified that political action against them remains difficult to imagine. Because of this, all political vantage points seem to take for granted what historian Toure Reed terms "neoliberalism's project of upward redistribution of wealth and the evisceration of the social safety net. . . the actual basis of power in a capitalist system" (2020:164).

As we in the United States stand on the precipice of an authoritarian turn with the election of Donald Trump, it may seem foolhardy and false to suggest any equivalence between the Right and the Left. Leftists or progressives have no significant national party, no real leaders. But what we do have is a somewhat shared perspective very much alive in our universities, non-profits, media, and most profoundly online. I wish to argue that there are elements of authoritarian states of mind in that shared perspective that echo the Right's. And what I mean by this is neatly summarized by psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas who states that the "core element" in such state of mind "in the individual or the group is the presence of an ideology that maintains its certainty through the operation of specific mental mechanisms aimed at eliminating all opposition. . . "To achieve such totality, the mind (or group) can entertain no doubt. Doubt, uncertainty, self-interrogation, are equivalent to weakness and must be expelled from the mind to maintain ideological certainty" (1992:200,201).

The authoritarian state of mind finds communion in shared certitude and moral outrage against those who deviate from the agreed upon narrative. We see this in how the Right quickly adopts whatever object of hatred Trump invents (most recently "migrant crime"). And I believe a similar state of mind is often present on the Left. The difference, however, is that the object of rage for progressives is often others on the Left. For those of us who participate in academic or psychoanalytic list serves and online forums, we see how frequently individuals are denounced due to divergent views on trans, sexual dimorphism, antisemitism, Hamas, reparations, etc. An excellent example of how certitude and condemnation operate on the Left comes from the Democratic Socialists of America, the largest Left organization in the US. DSA withdrew its support of its most famous member, Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez for being "insufficiently anti-Israel." It doesn't matter that she is the most effective, progressive member of the House of Representatives. She simply has deviated from the party line on a single issue and thus

must be punished. The demonstration of ideological purity clearly seems more important than actually effecting real social change, change that Ocasio-Cortes is in a powerful position to promote. Her punishment undoubtedly allows for DSA members to feel morally superior, to bond with one another, to channel their anger toward an object that they know and can have some effect on. But based on what I am arguing, it is a displacement, a turning away from that, which socialists, of all people, should be directing their criticism and rancor, that is, the corporate control of our economic, social, and moral lives for individual profit.

Ilene Philipson holds doctorates in sociology, clinical psychology, and in psychoanalysis. She is a Supervising Analyst at the San Francisco Center for Psychoanalysis, and is in the private practice of psychotherapy and psychoanalysis in the San Francisco Bay Area, California. Her books include *On the Shoulders of Women: The Feminization of Psychotherapy*; *Married to the Job: Why We Live to Work and What We Can Do About It*, and *Ethel Rosenberg: Beyond the Myths*.