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**Love the leader, hate the state: narcissistic protests against democratic rule[[1]](#footnote-1)**

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*Democracy demands a lot*

Following a rapid growth in the number of democracies around the world in the closing decades of the twentieth century, we are now seeing many democratic states faltering or in crisis[[2]](#footnote-2), unable to prevent the break-up of their publics into bitterly opposed groups, and with their legitimacy increasingly questioned. So why is democracy[[3]](#footnote-3) proving so difficult to sustain?

Some answers to that question focus on forces external to the democratic nation, such as international capital ravaging domestic economies and cultures, or foreign states intervening in domestic politics for geopolitical reasons. Other explanations look inside the nation, for example at the incompetence, mendacity or corruption of the political class whose job it is to make democratic institutions work. Crucial though these factors may be in many cases, a psychoanalytic contribution to understanding the malaise of democracy has to look elsewhere. In keeping with its radically reflexive nature, psychoanalysis suggests that we also look at ourselves, the democratic citizenry, the people or *demos* whose power a democracy should express.

Democracy makes great demands on us, psychologically, and it seems that in many countries the voting public does not collectively have the psychic resources - what I will call the emotional capital - to be able to meet those demands in a sustained way. Key to those resources is a capacity to tolerate and resolve ambivalence. All societies must manage the human ambivalence towards authority, the ineradicable existence in all our minds of both love and hatred for leaders and for laws. This is the legacy of infantile ambivalence towards the intractable otherness of the world, and its challenge to narcissism. The primal ambivalence is focused on the parental figures who represent the world, and later on the societal authorities who in a sense are psychically *in loco parentis*. Like parents, states are both needed and resented, and we have floating reserves of both gratitude and contempt towards those holding political power in our society. Although needed as much as parents, states are not loved in the same way, and so containing the ambivalence towards them is more difficult. It requires citizens who can resolve it by accepting, unconsciously as well as consciously, the necessity of government, while not expecting the aims of government to be identical with their own individual wishes. In other words, it requires citizens with the capacity for humility that comes from developmental movement beyond narcissistic omnipotence, from tolerating the disappointment attached to the reality principle.

That is a psychoanalytic way of restating a basic principle of democratic life, which is that individuals must be prepared to submit themselves voluntarily to the process and outcomes of democratic governance.[[4]](#footnote-4) This is a key difference of democracy from other regimes based on coercion of one form or another, which do not so fully delegate to individuals the task of ensuring their compliance with the authority of the state. Of course there is wide scope for conflict over whether a particular process is democratic, and different interest groups will prefer different forms of democratic procedure and institution. Here we are not looking at intra-societal conflicts of interests, but at a probably universal issue in political psychology, that of whether as individuals, and collectively, we are able to accept the authority over us of governments which represent other people as well as ourselves.

I will suggest that insufficient supply of the 'emotional capital'[[5]](#footnote-5) needed for that task is an important source of the present difficulties of democracy. While much of the literature on citizenly competence (e.g. Blackwell, 2018) has focused on engagement and cognitive factors (such as educational level, political knowledge and news media consumption), the question raised here is about whether, in our functioning as citizens in the *emotional* public sphere, our fundamental unconscious orientations may subvert the principles of democracy. This is not to lean towards the ancient anti-democratic view that the masses are not fit to vote. For one thing, elites are as much part of the problem as anyone else - more so, in fact, because of their roles in legitimating and propagating the attacks on democracy which come from shared unconscious phantasies. And nothing in the analysis to be offered here would lead to describing any of today's voting publics as, in Hillary Clinton's (2016) regrettable phrase, a 'basket of deplorables'. On the contrary, though the argument will be condensed here, the approach to be taken points to a more respectful attitude towards people who make electoral choices very different from one's own.

But there *is* a nettle to grasp. Psychoanalytic commentary on politics focuses on the roles of phantasy, delusion and defences against anxiety and guilt. That is not all it does: it also helps to understand how reparative and containing forces can emerge and be strengthened, and how sanity can be achieved. But its starting point, and rightly so, is usually pathology, that is, what is *wrong* with us, *inside* ourselves (albeit as a long-term consequence of experience of the external world), and not as a weird aberration but as part of everyday life. We need to find ways of pursuing this necessary diagnostic work without throwing more fuel on the fire of the culture wars by locating the problem exclusively in selected groups of our fellow citizens.

*The two-pronged attack on democracy*

I have suggested that governments of any sort, and the state of which they are part, evoke ambivalence in their citizens, because as the ultimate societal authority they stand psychically as the major institutional embodiment of others and their needs. The state represents the society of others, on which we depend absolutely, and yet this otherness is intrinsically a challenge to the narcissistic self, and a permanent object of our resentment and narcissistic rage.

Democracy requires that we function as individuals able to take the needs of others into account, for which we must be able, at least at key moments, to get over this narcissistic objection to being subjects of a state. We must resolve the ambivalence in favour of a basic acceptance of the 'other' - the demos, the democratic process, and the state - while retaining the capacity to judge it, and not losing ourselves in worship of the state or its figurehead. In Kleinian language, this requires functioning at the level of the depressive position with its toleration of internal conflict, and its avoidance of both idealisation and demonisation, and of the damaging absolute states of mind which they generate (Figlio, 2006; Mintchev & Hinshelwood, 2017).

But as individuals, and collectively, we may remain caught in a painful ambivalence towards what we might call the state object. The 'state object' is not the state in its various material, legal and procedural forms, but is the 'state in the mind' - how a person is unconsciously predisposed to perceive and think about the state. We may seek escape from the uncertainty and complexity of this ambivalence by establishing a kind of narcissistic control over the state object, which we can do in two possible ways. Each way represents one of the poles of the ambivalence. Both ways have damaging consequences, and both are found in association with what is now often called populism. Like populism, neither is intrinsically tied to any particular ideology. The first is the libertarian way. By 'libertarian' I mean the political principle of opposition to any governmental restraint on individuals beyond the barest minimum. This principle posits government of any type (or at least any *actually existing* type) as fundamentally a suspected or hated object to be countered or attacked. It idealises absolute freedom from authority, and seeks to dominate or annihilate the state object. It has a clear affinity with neo-liberal views, though these are not necessarily associated with it, and it may also animate the holding of some left-liberal positions. And secondly there is the authoritarian way, which idealises absolute authority. It seeks merger with the state object, which is typically transfigured into an adored leader. The depth of identification with the leader supports an unconditional allegiance. Again, this comes in various ideological colours.

Neither way is committed to democratic principles, and so neither makes the same emotional demands of citizens as does a democratic polity. On the contrary, they both offer support to narcissistic defences against the frustrations and anxieties associated with democratic life. So in a democracy there is a standing opportunity for either or both of these two apparently opposed political tendencies, the libertarian and the authoritarian, to establish strong bases of support in large minorities of the population.

While the opposition between these two tendencies is clear on some specific ideological issues, they do not represent clearly distinct and coherent bodies of opinion belonging to two clearly different sections of society. They are more like structures of feeling (Williams, 1961) upon which we all draw to various extents and in different ways. These two tendencies are apparent opposites but share a common source in the unconscious, which is the narcissistic intolerance of authority, the resistance to being governed by any agency *outside the self*. For libertarians, the governmental object, the state object, is constantly devalued and attacked. For authoritarians, it is merged with the self. Either way, the narcissistic wound which is inherent in being governed can be denied.

*Two contemporary examples*

Many of today's successful populist leaders seem to operate within the authoritarian mode of escaping from the demands of democracy, repeating the forms of authority which characterised the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century (albeit usually in less totalitarian mode). To take two examples, Hungary and Turkey are both countries which, after much internal conflict, oppression and violence, seemed by the end of the twentieth century to be entering democratic futures of a more liberal and settled nature, only to develop illiberal and authoritarian regimes in the twenty-first century. Both countries had histories of being at the centre of empires - the Austro-Hungarian and the Ottoman, with strong religious identities, Catholic Christian and Sunni Muslim respectively. Both experienced a humiliating end and aftermath of empire: Hungary's loss after World War I of nearly three-quarters of its territory, and for Turkey the end of Ottoman power in Europe. Studies of the transgenerational impact of international humiliation on the national psyche (e.g. Volkan, 2004) suggest that this now distant history is still an important contextual factor, a specific narcissistic wound from which these nations suffered before the spread of democracy posed further challenges to the narcissistic self throughout the world.

Both countries then went through to WW2 with formally democratic systems. But Hungary was an illiberal, antisemitic democracy under the Regency of Admiral Horthy, and in 1941 joined the Axis powers. It played a major part in the Holocaust, and then after its defeat by Russia in 1945 was part of the Communist bloc until 1989. In contrast, Turkey had emerged as a newly democratic and modernising nation in the 1920s, and went on to experience at least some form of western-style democracy until violence and corruption began to dominate its politics in the 1970s. So in the 1990s, when the first signs of today's neo-populisms were emerging, Hungary was in search of a way to integrate with the liberal, capitalist West, while Islamic Turkey was seeking a solution to its malfunctioning 'Western' democracy.

Viktor Orban was initially an anti-communist activist, working for a free, liberal Hungary. However, by the time he was first elected Prime Minister in 1998, the Fidesz party which he had helped to found in the 1980s had moved from its original classical liberal agenda to becoming a party of right-wing populism. Orban lost power in 2002, but since being re-elected in 2010 he has led a centralisation of powers and the 'backsliding' of Hungarian democracy, installing a strongly majoritarian type of governance to which he has famously applied the term 'illiberal democracy'. Central to this development is a particular interpretation of the principle that democratic government's task is the protection and development of the national community. That principle could be part of a liberal democratic framework, since all democratic governments have to address the needs of their peoples, who are defined by national boundaries. But for Orban and others the nation is defined in an intensely homogenised and idealised way which requires a high level of identification by its subjects if they are to consider themselves Hungarian.

The precondition for an effective authoritarian regime, especially if operating within a formally democratic constitution, is a strong commitment by a large if not majority section of the public to support the authoritarian leader, typically mediated through the popular espousal of an identity represented and offered by the leader. In its more intense forms, this can be seen as a process of massification, whereby - as was first pointed out by Freud (1921) in his essay on group psychology - individuals strongly identify themselves with the leader, so submerging themselves within the collective. There can be a fine line between this kind of psychic submission on the one hand, and ordinary, measured enthusiasms for public figures or causes on the other.

However, there *is* a line, marked in two ways. It can be defined psychologically by whether idealisation rather than reality-testing is involved, and by the extent to which the attachment to the authority figure is in the service of defending an inner bunker of narcissistic omnipotence. Societally, it is marked by the extent of restrictions on freedom and resources which remain for those who have opposed, or just not joined in, the massification process.

Many assessments of the Orban regime suggest that line has been crossed on the societal criterion. The 2020 Democracy Index (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2020) categorises Hungary as a 'flawed democracy', 55th equal with the Philippines. In the latest Freedom House (2020) report on post-communist nations, Hungary has fallen out of the 'Democracies' category into that of 'Hybrid' regimes. The criminalisation of political opponents, high levels of government control of both the courts and of culture, and its new power to impose states of emergency, all point to reduced freedoms. According to Freedom House, Hungary has 'dropped any pretence of respecting democratic institutions ... [and has been] centralizing power, tilting the electoral playing field, taking over much of the media, and harassing critical civil society organizations since 2010'. It is more difficult to establish what has happened psychologically. Orban has won three successive national elections, so we must assume that very substantial and stable support for him and his policies exists, but the psychic bases of that support are likely to be varied, and not all will fit the narcissistically-driven authoritarian pattern.

For example, the new constitution of 2011 stated there is a 'national religious belief system', which is Christianity. The use in official discourse of phrases such as 'national rebirth' and 'national faith' suggests that a phantasy of the nation as a transcendental and purified community is at work. Yet in some respects Hungary is a largely secular country (Bozoki, 2011, p. 660); in the census of that year only 54% of the population defined themselves as Christian, less than in 2001. Over that decade the percentage of the population self-describing as Catholics had declined from 54% to 40%, fewer than those not declaring a religion. However, Murer (2015) suggests that the flag of 'Christian Hungary' is a rallying point for all those troubled by some aspects of liberal, secular cosmopolitanism, and also that it may be seen by some as a code for anti-semitism, which has long been a potent presence in Hungary. Similarly, Orban's appeal to family and patriarchal values (Bozoki, p.650), although it may directly express the core values of many rural Hungarians, might also have some reassuring appeal to some of the urban population who have more liberal views but who are nonetheless disturbed by the cultural changes wrought by globalisation, and who find special difficulty in sustaining a liberal outlook on questions of sexuality, around which the illiberalism of Orban's democracy is particularly evident. His 'people's democracy' therefore probably rests on a coalition of voters, only some of whom are, both in their internal worlds and in their external behaviours, part of the massified body of those passionately identified with Orban's authority. Other Fidesz supporters with less need for merger with the idealised leader must still find their way to turning a blind eye to the mendacity and clientelism of the regime.[[6]](#footnote-6)

It can of course be argued that all this psychologically-oriented analysis is unnecessary, because there is a simple economic explanation for the electoral successes of Orban and Fidesz. Hungary's experiment with liberal democracy in the two decades following the collapse of communism was disastrous for many of its people, as de-industrialisation and privatisation brought dislocation and austerity. Orban, in line with the pro-welfare policies of other 'neo-populists' (Soare et al., 2013) offered a restoration of some of the basic material securities that communism had delivered, for example in the re-establishment of universal health care, and a counter to the burgeoning inequalities of the post-communist period.

Yet we do not have to choose between socio-economic and psycho-social explanations. As Scheiring (2020) notes, there is an interweaving of economic and cultural/identity factors. The globalisation of markets impacts on both national economies and national sentiments, and neo-populist nationalism succeeds electorally when it can mobilise, around a single leader, distress about both areas of damage. Orban has offered Hungarians both a measure of material security and a sense of dignity (albeit in a defensive form). In addition, background cultural and political contexts must of course have some influence on the particular psychological forms which resistance to liberal democracy is taking in different countries. In Hungary, the regression to authoritarianism must be seen in relation to its experience of communism, and perhaps, in a longer-term and more diffuse way, to its imperial and Catholic history.

It is noteworthy that something similar might be said of Turkey, in relation to its imperial and Islamic history. Recep Tayyip Erdogan's rise to become, in 2014, the first elected president of Turkey has been due to his success in installing himself at the head of the Islamist political movement which has sought to re-Islamise the Turkish polity and unravel the secular republic created by Kemal Ataturk in the 1920s. Unlike Orban, whose background is middle class, Erdogan comes from a poor part of Istanbul, and so in classic populist mode is readily available for identification as 'one of us' by the impoverished people of rural Turkey (from where his devout parents came) and the urban poor (Cagaptay, 2017). Like Orban, he has won three successive general elections, and in 2017 oversaw a referendum which approved constitutional changes whereby the office of prime minister was abolished and the president became head of government as well as head of state. For Erdogan, democracy now means the delegation of almost limitless power to the elected president (Turk, 2018, p.14). He had already been taking a number of steps to reduce media freedoms and judicial independence, and - in a specific educational intervention - to end of teaching Darwinian evolutionary theory in schools. After the failed coup attempt against him in 2016, the silencing and intimidation of political opponents and dissenters was conducted on a very large scale, with tens of thousands imprisoned on 'terrorism' charges. Whereas Hungary remains 'Partly free' according to the Freedom House 2021 assessment of its political rights and civil liberties, Turkey is 'Not free'. The Economist's latest Democracy Index classifies Turkey, at 104th of 167 nations, as a 'hybrid' of democracy and autocracy.[[7]](#footnote-7)

From his time as an activist in the groups and parties on the Islamist political scene in Turkey in the 1990s, Erdogan has espoused a nationalist version of political Islam. His use of the notion of a National Will strikes the same notes of idealisation and massification as the language used in Hungary, and draws on long-standing populist traditions in Turkey which were frequently active during its fragile and irregular democratic development in the twentieth century (Cagaptay, 2017, Chap. 2) . As in Hungary, in Erdogan's Turkey there is a strongly homogenised vision of national identity, with historical roots in the strategy of Ataturk's government to 'Turkify' Turkey, i.e. to produce an ethnically and religiously pure nation (Cagaptay, 2006). And again, there is a strong strand of anti-semitism in the pool of sentiment to be drawn on.

In both countries, the 'nation' is, in an operational sense, the majority - however narrow - which has elected the government. So the majority who have voted it in must continue to believe that it serves their interests. Again, a form of neo-nationalist welfarism has been important in achieving this in Turkey (Akcay, 2018), including comprehensive health care, enhanced employment rights, and more generous educational provision, as well as some cash handouts. Erdogan has also promoted a number of spectacular infrastructural projects, realising their symbolic as well as possible economic contribution to national pride. Turk (2018) suggests that these reflect a 'techno-cultural' dimension to his vision of politics, and that he seeks to endow them with a 'sacred' quality, an interesting context in which to view his construction of a hugely expensive new presidential palace.

So in both countries there are material reasons why some people might vote repeatedly for an authoritarian leader with divisive and damaging politics, even when corruption and cronyism may be evident. Bearing this in mind guards against a narrowly psychological focus on unconscious phantasy and mass psychology. At the same time, material provision also has symbolic meaning, for example in stimulating a phantasy of an omnipotent and loving leader. This may at times be more influential on voting behaviour than the actual material benefits provided.

At the risk of over-simplification, we may say in summary that in each of these two countries similar authoritarian regimes have developed under these leaders. They both began with a more liberal administration, until the impacts of globalisation were more keenly felt, and the weaknesses of very imperfect democracies fuelled desires for change to bring stability and integrity. Both leaders have on several occasions commanded a little over 50% of the popular vote in securing their continuation in power. For some observers, popular support for the neo-nationalist, neo-populist forms of authoritarianism seen in our two examples is the product of incitement by demagogic politicians; others see the demagogy as no more than a catalyst, with the deeper causes of the populist success being 'rooted in workers' lived experience of class dislocation' (Scheiring, op. cit., p.1173). On the present analysis, however, a third and most basic level must be added: the citizen's experience of the emotional demands and difficulties which are inherent in being subject to democratic governance will also be part of the picture.

Within that level, we can only speculate how much of the 50+% support consists of hardcore, phantasy-driven massified support, how much is more a matter of cynical or calculating acceptance, and how much is driven by a resentment of the basic fact of governance which is fundamentally narcissistic, but for whatever reason, has not been fully captured by the rhetoric and promises of Orban and Erdogan. Voters with that emotional stance could later on defect, perhaps to more extremist parties.

That consideration points to one of the many nation-specific factors which must be taken into account in a full study of any single example. The overall current political landscape exerts pressures on the policy orientations of autocrats, and shapes their rhetoric. In Hungary, Orban and Fidesz have a substantial populist rival in the violently extreme right-wing party Jobbik, which has been able to claim over 10% of the electorate. In Turkey, the extremist Nationalist Movement Party led by Devlet Bahçeli has recently made small electoral progress, though the main threat to Erdogan's majority support comes more from competing elements in power struggles within the political and military elites (Akcay, 2018). More broadly though, while our two nation examples come with very different cultural and political histories, they show remarkable similarity in their early twentieth century experiences of humiliation (a seedbed of narcissistic rage) and their subsequent trajectory, through late twentieth and early twenty-first century turmoil, towards authoritarianism, and they must now be seen not as full democracies but as authoritarian/democratic 'hybrids'.

In the brief discussion above, we have seen how as forms of populism these regimes show consistent authoritarian tendencies, and are recognisable successors to the authoritarian regimes of the twentieth century. As such, our understanding of them needs to draw on and develop the psychological analyses offered of those earlier examples, especially the works of Adorno, Fromm and others in the Frankfurt School. However not all of today's neo-populisms are of this relatively uniform authoritarian type. There is another type of hybridity to consider, one in which authoritarianism is contrasted and mixed not with democracy, but with the other major mode of escape from the constraints of democracy, namely libertarianism. These two '-isms' may appear to be antithetical tendencies, modes of escape between which we must choose. However, as noted earlier they have a common root. Demagogic leaders who are able to tap that common root, and to address and represent both tendencies, therefore have a powerful key to unlock and deploy very large bodies, potentially majorities, of emotionally strong popular support.

*The elasticity of Trump*

The underlying commonality between these two strategies is suggested by the way in which they are sometimes combined in one political position. While the 'Trump studies' literature is already excessive, we will briefly consider Trumpism here as there is no more clear or more important example of this phenomenon. In Trump's base we find the stark libertarianism of defending the individual's right to bear arms, or to not wear a Covid mask, and generally to be free of governmental constraint, all fused with idealisations of Trump's authoritarian style and a willing embrace of his edicts. This political elasticity offers a home to a very broad mix of people. What they have in common is a desire to evade the real responsibilities of democratic citizenship by escaping into a world where they can abolish *and/or* merge with the hated/needed authority object.

It may seem as if the libertarian elements are dominant, in the militia-style individualism of groups such as the Oath Keepers (Southern Poverty Law Center, nd a) and the Proud Boys (Feuer, 2018), the gun-toting "I'll do what I want" swagger (Southern Poverty Law Center, nd b), the refusal of masks, of science, and of evidence, and the rock'n'roll demeanour of some amongst the mob crashing into the Capitol on 6th January 2021. But the bottom line for Trumpism is authoritarian: the only glue binding most of the 74 million who voted for him in 2020 to each other, and to Trump, is the man himself and his extraordinary success in establishing himself as the political love-object for so many Americans. Trump's administration was an erratic but autocratic regime driven mainly by the whim of its perversely charismatic leader. He gives constant expression to a hatred of the federal state long felt amongst large sections of the American public, while also being the totem around which his supporters - and crucially, since 2016, the Republican Party - dance, and to which they readily submit themselves. He promises to abolish all authority which vexes Americans' libertarian selves, while providing an idealised leader figure with whom their authoritarian selves can merge.

It must be remembered that there are some very different reasons why people voted for him (Pew Research, 2020), and that many did so without having signed up to the cultish body of fanatical supporters seen at his rallies. 13% of Trump voters thought that he is too hot-headed and speaks without thinking. The 2020 Presidential election saw many votes cast as negative choices, with 19% of Trump voters offering as a reason for their choice that he was not Biden (ibid.). A very powerful engine of support for many populists is antipathy towards political and cultural elites, against whom the populist will claim to fight for the 'people'. But for whatever reasons, a very large and diverse constituency has massified around Trump, some of whom are fused in passionate idealisation of him. At the psychotic extreme of Trumpism, in the Q Anon conspiracy theory[[8]](#footnote-8), traditional libertarian hatred of governmental authority has intensified into horror-movie paranoid fantasies of a satanic 'deep state', yet this is still paired with a belief in a transcendent authority figure (Trump himself) as the saviour of the people from the deep state.

This co-presence of the two sides of a split is not the same as overcoming the split, which requires the containment of both the divergent impulses, rather than both being acted out. The concurrent expression of both sides is a very paradoxical phenomenon, which for rationalistic types of psychological theory would be very hard to explain. However, it may be quite functional as a defensive organisation of the narcissistic self, since it covers both bases - it allows expression of both the impulse to destroy the overbearing other, *and* the impulse to merge with the protective other. This may help to explain the persistence of substantial popular support for Trump (who got over 11 million votes more in 2020 than 2016), and perhaps others of today's so-called 'authoritarian' leaders in ostensibly democratic states, though in the two examples we have previously considered there are no obvious signs of a libertarian underbelly.

The Brexit vote is often put in the same broad category as Trump's election victory, in that both are seen as in some way 'populist'. While there are important similarities between the two, at the psychological level pro-Brexit opinion was heavily skewed towards the libertarian side of the core ambivalence towards government and the state. Brexit offered us the libertarian experience of throwing off the suffocating rule of 'Brussels', and thereby entering a golden age of untrammelled freedom. Farage's flame flickered for a while, but he was not an autocrat-in-waiting. The Johnson administration's readiness to break international law in order to solve the Irish border problem (Hogarth, 2020) speaks to a particularly aggressive continuation of Brexit libertarianism: the government was happy to announce a 'specific and limited' illegality. In this way of behaving, rule-breaking can be seen as signalling 'strength': this is the perverse libertarian appeal of the transgressor (Richards, 2019), which has been so important to Trump's success in retaining his support base.

*A libertarian tilt?*

In any case, overall, Brexit-based populism was more purely expressive of the libertarian side of the psychic split between the urge to destroy authority and that to merge with it. And at the time of writing, anti-vax and other conspiracy theorists are using Covid-19 to exploit our primitive ambivalence towards government, and to drive a libertarian wedge into the body of public feeling about the pandemic and how we manage it. So in our collective efforts to escape our ambivalence towards government, it seems that in some countries there may, at least on the surface, be a pivoting away from authoritarian modes towards more libertarian ones. They are after all branches of the same tree.

This growing strength of the libertarian defence against ambivalence is consistent with what has been a major cultural trend since the 1960s, especially but not only in the West. This trend, documented in the World Values Survey (Inglehart, 2018) and other survey data across international publics (e.g. Ipsos, 2020), is often thought of as one of liberalisation, and indeed core liberal values such as rationality and freedom of expression are at its heart. But the post-1960s cultural revolution has also brought some libertarian values into much more prominent and influential positions across societies: that is, default positions of deep distrust and antipathy towards authorities of many kinds. The societal drivers of this trend are no doubt complex, though one has surely been consumer culture and its increasing emphasis on the satisfactions of freedom.

But we can also see the rise of *liberal* values as serving to encourage the turn to authoritarian modes. This points up the importance of keeping in mind the complex distinction between libertarianism and liberalism. As just noted, these broad categories of ideas and values can overlap, but they are fundamentally different. Liberalism, in contrast, is not an *escape* from ambivalence, but rather it is the ideological territory in which we are most likely to find ways of *overcoming* our ambivalence to government, by finding stable political expressions of the ability to tolerate otherness without losing selfhood. Criticism of that view, as a Western-centric use of psychoanalysis in order to equate liberal democracy with psychic maturity, opens up a debate which is beyond the scope of this article. Nonetheless, we must note that the rise of authoritarian populisms can be seen as part of a global *reaction* to the rise of liberal values, an argument which has been presented in different ways by, inter alia, Mark Lilla (2018) and Norris and Inglehart (2019).

Why would this reaction happen? A reductively psychological approach might use the argument of this article to suggest that we are up against a universal human weakness, our limited capacity for accepting reality, and so when we are increasingly asked to accept the emotional demands and disappointments of liberal democracy, a lot of us inevitably seek safety in the certainties and promises of anti-democratic alternatives. But a psychopolitical approach can offer better prospects, by focussing on how our emotional needs may be responded to in different ways by different forms of liberal democratic politics, with some reducing the needs for escape into one side or another of the authoritarian-libertarian split. Lilla, writing of the U.S.A., sees the problem as a collapse of liberalism into identity politics, which prevents it from meeting the public need for a vision of national community, a field then left open to Trumpism. He points to the possibility of developing what he calls a civic liberalism, with a focus on the responsibilities of citizenhood and on strong national democratic institutions. This might assist individual citizens to refuse the temptations of escape into authoritarianism, or libertarianism, or, as we have seen, some fusion of the two, as in the Trumpist project of seeking merger with the state object (personified in Trump the leader), while also wanting to destroy it.

While the two examples we have discussed (and others we might have used, such as Poland) are clearly authoritarian, in Western Europe we might expect the threat to come in more hybrid forms. A love of the leader may be complemented by a hatred of the state, particularly of the liberal state, a phenomenon which has been clear for some time in the rhetoric of some extreme right-wing groups in the UK (Richards, 2013). The fact that the loved leader may be the head of state is no barrier to the development of this configuration of feeling, since contradiction is not a problem for phantasy-driven politics. Ultimately, the authoritarian moment will be dominant, because the populist leader wants to exercise power. In any event, the libertarian dream of a vanishingly small government cannot exist in reality, while the authoritarian defence can seem to offer a tough realism.

Whatever combinations there may be of modes of escape from ambivalence, there are standing risks to the functioning of democratic states from our human difficulties in managing ambivalence about being governed. If that is so, it raises the question of whether the present wave of threats to democracies is somehow linked with a reduction in our emotional capital, particularly with a narcissistic reduction in our collective capacity to tolerate ambivalence. Why might this be? Have the multiple disruptions and destabilisations of globalisation made us feel less secure at this very deep psychic level? Has the unboundaried chaos of the online universe corroded our sense of safety offline? Are these anxiety-building developments impacting directly on how adults behave as citizens, or are today's political instabilities emerging because increasing numbers of today's adults were influenced in their early psychic development by the new socio-cultural conditions? And why do nations differ in their toleration of what democracy demands - because of their international status and history, their religious and cultural traditions, patterns of family dynamics and child-rearing, or for other reasons? These are major psycho-historical questions, interesting to ponder but not easy to answer, nor to bring to bear on contemporary politics in a practical way.

Still, the more we understand such problems the closer we might get to knowing how best to address them. I hope to have conveyed something about a very subterranean dimension of unconscious meaning in some of today's political phenomena. The chameleon of narcissism, once released into the political public sphere, can take strikingly different forms and colours. I am not suggesting that adherents of any particular view are, as individuals, pathologically narcissistic at the level of overall personality functioning. I am suggesting that the narcissistic tendencies in all of us can animate and support particular attitudes or outlooks in a specific area of life, in this case citizenhood. A part of the self becomes temporarily conscripted to something which may be at odds with other parts of that self, and which may involve no more than a single act of voting, but which if it occurs amongst enough people may have major historical consequences. So there can be no stable democracy without a stable and trusting *demos*, one able to accept that despite power being in its hands, it must still be governed.

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1. An earlier version of this article was presented at the online Psychoanalysis and the Public Sphere Conference on 'Psychoanalysis and Social Fault Lines', organised by the Freud Museum, London and the *Free Associations* journal, 19-27 September 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See the various annual assessments of the strength and quality of democracy around the world, e.g. Democracy Index, Democracy Ranking, Freedom in the World. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. There are many definitions of 'democracy'. My working definition emphasises fair and free elections, the accountability of government to the people, the rule of law, and independent media, all of which can contribute to democracy's challenge to citizens' narcissism. But the psychological considerations to be offered in this article are likely to apply across most if not all definitions and empirical instances of 'democracy'. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This is complementary to the principle that governments must abide by the outcomes of democratic process, however that is defined in specific situations. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. By this term I mean the overall resources present in a society for the development and support of emotional well-being; see Richards, 2019, pp. 17-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Quite how that is done, how this segment of the electorate colludes with the authoritarian trend, is a key question politically, but one for which an answer is elusive - though see the contributions by Figlio and Hinshelwood in this issue for directions in which to look. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. And notably, back in 2014 Gallup International found with their data on a 'subjective' measure of democracy that the Turkish public saw their country as being less democratic than the Freedom House index suggested (Stoychev, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Which 24% of a national U.S.A. sample believe to be at least 'somewhat accurate', in a 2020 poll (Sabin, 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)