

Some confusions around authoritarianism today¹

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In trying to understand the rise of authoritarianism today we are faced by confusions generated on three fronts:

1. post-truth politics
2. the authoritarian-libertarian convergence
3. the meanings of national identity

The post-truth collapse of meaning

Lies and deception are not unique to authoritarian regimes, but can be particularly useful to those regimes in that they can help to persuade people that they are living in free and democratic societies when in fact they are not. So there is an authoritarian proclivity to lies and deception, which over time is likely to create a sort of confusion in which we have a less firm sense of what truth is and where to find it.

But now we are encountering a condition of political discourse in which truth no longer matters. This ‘post-truth’ condition is different from deception, which is about contesting the truth. If people no longer value the principle of truth, there is no need to engage in contestation about what is true. You can simply assert your ‘truth’ and not bother to defend it. It just doesn’t matter that it’s not true. The truth-value of a statement bears little or no relation to how it is received by many of those in the audience.

Trumpism has of course been the leading edge of this development since 2016, though it appears to be a global phenomenon. Full-on MAGA enthusiasts are not interested in the fact-checkers’ scrutiny; that is no longer the point. They believe in the meta-message, which is, in a sense, that Trump himself defines reality, and that he can do so without much reference to the actually existing world. The apprehension of that reality is not a cognitive process based on interaction with the external world. It is an internal, emotional state, in which the subject is effectively merged with the leader and his utterances – the ideal state for the authoritarian dynamic. Statements become flags to wave rather than attempts to communicate information or to express thought. And statements are usually assertions; there is rarely such a thing as a question. The important thing is to be one of the group that waves the flags. The members of this group have, it seems, in their enthrallment to the leader, suspended the ego-function of observing the reality principle, and the potential shared meanings of empirical truths are no longer relevant.

Trump’s rival to Twitter, as was, is called Truth Social. That is perhaps a more appropriate name than Truth Empirical or Truth Actual, as it could be taken to mean that the platform hosts a version of ‘truth’ as defined by a particular social group. Indeed the social phenomenon of the MAGA ‘movement’ could be seen as a nightmare embodiment of the academic deconstructionist theory which claims that much of what we might take to be free-standing truth is actually a social construction, produced to serve the interests of a particular social class or

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group. Perhaps in this time of MAGA the deconstructionists should now be calling ‘Come back objective truth, we need something like you after all!’

Post-truth politics is not just a cognitive collapse; it is an emotional and moral one. It takes confusion to a different level from that of the citizen in a more traditionally authoritarian state, who is used to being deceived. It takes us to the edge of an epistemic unmooring, perhaps comparable to the confusion produced by dementia, in that some rudimentary frames of reference have fragmented. Alternatively, psychoanalysis might see the defiance of the post-truther as a perversion: not only is the distinction between reality and illusion lost, but the capacity to distinguish good from bad has disappeared. And this moral failure is actually the more fundamental one.

So this first area of confusion is within authoritarianism itself, in the dynamics between leaders and followers, and it involves the degradation of the minds of all those involved. The degradation is one of immersion in an impulsive irrationality, sustainable only in a bubble of massively narcissistic delusion.

Authoritarianism and libertarianism: two sides of the same coin

The second area is again based on a trend within today’s authoritarianism, but it also affects those of us who try to situate ourselves outside the authoritarian world, because it confuses us as to what that world now is, and what kind of problem it presents to liberal democracy. This is the trend towards a convergence between authoritarianism and libertarianism.

Authoritarianism and libertarianism appear to have contradictory premises and to diverge politically. The Frankfurt School pioneers of psychosocial theory in the mid-C20 saw authoritarian leadership as requiring followers who closely identify with the *group* which the leader represents, and who take direction from the idealised leader, whom they would entrust with the full powers of the state. Contrastingly, libertarianism valorises the freedom of the *individual* as the supreme principle of society; it takes diverse forms, including neo-liberalism and some bohemian counter-cultures. Its ideal, self-sufficient subject avoids identifications with groups, and regards all forms of authority with suspicion. The state may be tolerated as a necessary evil, but must constantly be fought lest it encroaches on freedoms.

Yet we can increasingly see these two ‘-isms’ being intertwined. Trump, for example, is often seen as the leading case of resurgent authoritarianism. On the one hand he clearly fits an autocratic model of leadership, and autocracy is a very clear form of anti-democratic authoritarianism. His relationship with his followers is classically authoritarian, in that he demands and receives their idealisation as the tribune and protector of the collective which his supporters believe they comprise, and he is their source of truth. He speaks, and they respond, as if he and they are merged. Yet on the other hand Trump also loudly represents a degenerate and sexist version of libertarian individualism, as the predatory and hedonistic businessman who triumphantly stalks the jungle, the only world which he knows and can understand, where cut-throat competition negates all human attachments and group allegiances. This is also an important part of his appeal.

We need to turn to psychoanalysis to understand the psychic basis of this counter-intuitive convergence of superficially divergent currents of feeling and ideology.² Why and how can someone feel drawn both to immerse themselves in an intense group identity, on the lines of Freud's classic analysis of group psychology, and also to claim a freedom from any collective commitment, as if we are unobliged sovereign individuals? Post-Freudian psychoanalysis can make sense of this with the concept of the core complex, which sees both tendencies as complementary defences against the same core anxiety. That is the primitive fear of annihilation, of the loss of self.

Such fear can take two forms. One is of being alone, of losing all relation to the other, which would mean the death of the self. And one is of not being separate, of disappearing forever into the other. We can think of these as, respectively, the agoraphobic and claustrophobic terrors. These twin terrors both spring from the same unconscious source in an insecurity of the self, but they lead to apparently opposite behaviours. The agoraphobic defence is to make a home in the group and immerse oneself in it, which in political terms would be the potentially authoritarian option, while the claustrophobic defence is to escape from the group into individual freedom, which is the basis of a libertarian position.

But the two are functionally equivalent as defences against the same underlying insecurity, and moreover the defence against one fear might shift the anxiety across to the other one. So their combination in one person, or in one political movement, makes complete sense psychologically. This fusion of or alternation between the two forms is more likely to come about in a cultural context of 'liquidity', where social boundaries of various sorts have become more porous and unstable, and hybridity is commonplace in many domains.

Thus a 'new social character is emerging in modern Western societies: the libertarian-authoritarian personality' (Nachtwey & Amlinger, 2024). This confusing development requires a reset of our thinking about the present threats to liberal democracy, which are more complex and broad than we might have thought. Authoritarian leaders, especially those of 'populist' style, can exploit confusion about what authoritarianism is, and how it can be camouflaged. They can use this hybridity to reach wider constituencies, targeting the many people whose political sensibilities are at least partly libertarian.

National identity: another side of the coin

The third area of confusion is one which we liberal and left opponents of authoritarianism have made for ourselves. It concerns national identity. The usual suspects in today's roll call of authoritarians (Orban, Erdogan, Modi, Putin, Trump, et al.) are often described as authoritarian nationalists; indeed, those two words are often linked together, as if describing twinned evils. And indeed, authoritarian leaders do often promote an idealising preoccupation with a national identity which is xenophobic, sometimes racist or even supremacist. Such 'nationalism' is likely to be linked to divisive and illiberal policies, and to belligerent rhetoric.

However, other kinds of identification with one's nation are possible, in which the nation is on balance a good if flawed object, not an idealised one. The fantasies attached to that object are more concerned with gratitude and reparation, unlike the fears of persecution and annihilation

² I have written elsewhere about this convergence, and how it appears in conspiracism and culture wars. See Richards, 2022 and 2024, and also Nachtwey & Amlinger, 2024.

which drive the enmities and the defensive grandiosity of aggressive nationalisms. Yet this face of national identity is rarely recognised by large bodies of opinion amongst liberal and left publics, whose focus is often exclusively on the nation as imperial oppressor and the institutional home of domestic inequalities. The cosmopolitan outlooks which are dominant in these publics are doubtful about the possibility of benign national identity, beyond a lukewarm and vague 'patriotism', and have little interest in the importance of that identity to many people as the location of their place in the world, their basic large group identity. This cosmopolitanism would probably prefer that nations themselves did not exist, and it is comfortable with the idea that authoritarianism and nationalism are inevitable bedfellows.

So there is an obstructive confusion here, in the sense that analysis has become mired in a one-dimensional image of national identity which conflates it with badness. Authoritarianism gets mixed up with nationalism, which can give the impression that national identity is nothing more than a tool which demagogic authoritarians use to advance themselves. This obscures the spontaneous and legitimate nature of national feeling, and the need therefore for liberal-democratic policies and rhetoric to address that feeling.

Of great relevance here is the psychoanalytic understanding, developed by Vamik Volkan and others, of the importance to selfhood of large group identities (e.g. Volkan, 2004). We need to be able to experience belonging to a large and meaningful social group, which must be a group defined by some cultural commonality, however rudimentary, in order for it to be emotionally meaningful. Since the nation is for most people the primary political large group to which they belong, it is not surprising that the nation, as a cultural object, can be the object of intense feeling, and that national identity is commonly an important element in self-identity. The leading theorist of nations and nationalism, Anthony Smith (2009), noted that this spontaneous and emotionally powerful dimension of national identity (which is 'ethnic' in the sense of cultural) was ignored by those writers who wanted to present nationalism as basically a modern artifice created to help rulers secure the support of their peoples.

It is possible to take this line of argument further and to propose that national identity is an important psycho-cultural root of liberal democracy. The American sociologist Liah Greenfeld, a more controversial theorist of nationalism, has done something of that sort in her proposition (see Greenfeld, 2016) that national citizenship is central to the emergence of the modern individual subject. She argues that the equality of all citizens within the nation is, despite being more of a principle than an empirical reality, a major source of the sense of dignity and self-worth. This is deeply valuable for a modern self freed from the limitations of restrictive traditional society yet lacking in the stable self-identity and meaningfulness attached to traditional roles.

But for the present purpose of clearing away some confusion around authoritarianism it is best to conclude simply with an emphasis on the strategic implications of the argument thus far. Left-liberal attitudes of indifference, suspicion or contempt towards national identity will leave this emotionally important component of many people's self-identity vulnerable to co-option by authoritarian and illiberal leaders. A number of academics and commentators have in different ways been making this point for some years now (for just two examples of a wide literature, see Etzioni, 2019, and Goodhart, 2017), but with so far only limited impact on a lot of political discourse. The situation may however be changing. The Starmer government appears at times to recognise the problem, but after decades of cosmopolitan dominance in the Labour Party, as in the other main parties, basic orientations are not easily adjusted. Consequently, authoritarian voices are still able to make the loudest and most seductive appeals to the deep reserves of national feeling.

Conclusion

We should not take all those appeals at face value. Let's go back to the point with which we began, that is the close association between authoritarianism and untruth, and link it to the issue of national identity. In the more extreme cases of perverse alienation from truth, we may find that the most basic promise made to the public is not only going to be broken, but was from the outset a lie, a cover for the authoritarian's real, unconscious objective. Consider the possibility suggested by Justin Frank³, the psychobiographer of three American Presidents, including Donald Trump (Frank, 2018), that Trump's unconscious wish is not to 'make America great again', but to destroy America. He has no more affection for the American people than he has for any other people; his narcissistic disconnection from humanity does not discriminate, and his activities so far appear to be aiming at the destruction of America's alliances, many of its state institutions, and its unity as a nation. That's a path towards the destruction of the USA.

So authoritarianism, in the three areas I've been discussing, namely its attacks on truth and meaning, its deep connection with libertarianism, and its often cynical exploitation of national identity, is not what it may often seem, and not what we expect it to be. All this confounds our thinking about how to resist it, for which we need to have the full measure of authoritarianism's psychological power to convert liberal democracies into illiberal ones, or into polarised and unstable states.

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³ See Frank, 2018, and the discussion of his work in the [Metapolitics](#) podcast series.