

CULTS OF PERSONALITY

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The nineteenth century saw frequent appeals to the idea of a redeemer personality, a heroic leader – musings which culminated in the cults devoted to Hitler and Stalin. This article shows that the self-assertion of leaders can stimulate the self-abasement of the followers on whom they depend (and vice versa), and discusses in what circumstances such an interplay becomes dominant in a society, and with what advantages and disadvantages for it.

Richard Overly devotes a chapter to this subject in his study of Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia (*The Dictators*, BCA, 2004). He notes Hitler's argument in *Mein Kampf* that the chief purpose of the state is to promote the higher personalities – distinct by their very nature from the masses – to positions of authority. From 1926 he 'presented himself as living proof that personality, not aptitude, wealth or title, was the key to supreme political leadership' (100). Stalin was initially less than enthusiastic about the cult status popularly ascribed to him, but he later exploited it. His view of it was 'opportunistic and cynical, whereas Hitler's was deadly earnest' (103).

Overly shows that there was much in relatively recent thinking that endorsed such cults. Carl Jung drew on nineteenth-century ideas when he wrote that 'our age calls for the redeemer personality' (125). 'The hero, the leader, the saviour is one who discovers a new way to a greater certainty' (109). Such antecedents furnish one reason why the German and Soviet populations were so willing to accept the claims of their leaders; for it was not just the

propaganda of the party apparatus that moulded the cults into 'the grotesque forms that they assumed at their apogee', but 'popular, enthusiastic endorsement of them' (119). There was understandably widespread disillusionment in Germany by 1945, but in Russia the cult persisted, and when Stalin died in 1953, 'the whole nation mourned' (98). After Khrushchev denounced him in 1956, the Soviet Central Committee published a memorandum 'Concerning the Setting Aside of the Personality Cult' to ensure that nothing like such idolatry would be repeated (130).

Psychologists have long been aware of the two tendencies which my teacher Ronald Englefield called (in a private communication) defiance and reliance. In his *Social Psychology* (the fifteenth edition was issued in 1920) William McDougall wrote of the emotions of self-assertion in the one case and self-abasement in the other. Englefield observed that the way that the one tendency in a leader prompts the other in followers and vice versa can be observed in animal as well as in human communities. Overy speaks of 'a bond . . . , an expression of relationship of power between leader and follower' (129). I have discussed this matter in some detail in my study of the sources of credulity entitled *Belief and Make-Believe* (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1991) and I will here review some of the evidence I adduced there.

In 1883 Francis Galton noted, of the African cattle he had observed, that if the ox is separated from his herd, he 'strives for all his might to get back again, and when he succeeds he plunges into its middle to bathe his whole body in the comfort of close companionship'. The advantages of keeping with the herd are obvious. A solitary animal may be taken off its guard, but in a herd there are hundreds of eyes and ears to see or hear the warning signal and spread the alarm. But if such an instinct of conformity were equally developed in all the animals, the herd's behaviour would depend on the chance movement even of its most timid and foolish members; and so if chaos is to be avoided, the herd must contain individuals of

a specially courageous and sagacious type, endowed with a special influence, power, prestige and self-reliance. However, these self-reliant individuals must not be too numerous, otherwise the uniform action of the herd would be destroyed. There could be no leaders if there were not a much larger number of followers, for no group could cohere if all were rebels. Nevertheless, the defiant, self-confident tendency is to a limited extent present in all, and can be stimulated by special circumstances. A timid child, when put in charge of a younger one, seems to gain new courage and self-reliance at having someone to look after.

The dependence of the majority in animal communities on the sagacity of high-ranking members has been extensively studied by Konrad Lorenz among others. In his *On Aggression* (English Translation published by Methuen in 1966) he gives, among other impressive examples, the expression movements of jackdaws: those movements of high-ranking ones, 'particularly of an old male, are paid much more attention to by the colony members than those of a lower-ranking, young bird'. If the latter shows fright at some meaningless stimulus, the others ignore him. 'But if the same sort of alarm proceeds from one of the old males all the jackdaws within sight and earshot immediately take flight'.

The essence of reliance is the absence of panic in the presence of danger when protected by a defiant individual. In an isolated family of gorillas in the forest, the father can protect his offspring provided they keep together. But if they were to scatter in fright at imminent danger, his task would be impossible. Hence there must be obedience and reliance, while the courage of the father is enhanced by this reliance on him. We seem to be faced here with two complementary instincts. The one implies pugnacity, self-will and sagacity, and it is stimulated by the expression of the instinct of submissiveness and obedience in others. The female mammal is twice as fierce and redoubtable when she has her young to defend. Their weakness and reliance stimulates her to protection and defiance. In human societies many an officer

in war finds himself filled with unexpected courage in the presence of the men who rely on him.

The particular master or idol the human reliant chooses will depend largely on circumstances. He or she may, according to the accidents of experience, become a follower of his father, his teacher, or his priest. But once a particular attachment has been formed it is not easily broken. This is particularly striking in cases of commitment to religious and political ideas. Moreover, an attitude of strong reliance on such ideas can quite commonly coexist with the reverse attitude where these are not involved. Francis Coleman, in his 1986 study of the life and work of Pascal, noted that in physics he refused to defer to anything except fact and experiment, while in his religious experiences he not only wanted but demanded to be dominated. In his eyes, 'the greatest evil of the epoch lay in espousing new ideas in religion that have no roots in authority, and rejecting new ideas in the sciences because they are incompatible with the dicta of the ancients'. Newton likewise broke with tradition in his physical enquiries, but in his writings on the prophets he was much more faithful to it, holding, for instance, that to reject the prophecies in the book of Daniel is to reject the Christian religion.

When a society is threatened by an external foe, or thinks it is, the occasion often seems to produce a competent leader because where there is no danger, the rebellious, querulous tendencies of individuals are able to show themselves, and factional strife then obscures the competence of the superior mind. Hobbes said that 'man is then most troublesome when he is at ease; for it is then that he loves to show his wisdom and control the actions of them that govern the commonwealth' (*Leviathan*, ch. 17). And Goethe wrote of 'the need for independence, which always arises in time of peace', whereas the compulsions and restraints which go with wartime are not felt to be moral affronts (Book 12 of his autobiography *Dichtung und Wahrheit*). How readily Britain made the considerable sacrifices demanded by its leaders in the two major wars of the

twentieth century! In time of war, then, the majority become submissive, whereas in peace defiance is more generally distributed. When the situation seems seriously threatening self-reliance vanishes and is replaced by loyalty and orthodoxy, as people look to a leader to save them.

To write history means discovering some persistent entities in terms of which to describe events. Some historians have spoken as though there were no actors, but only actions – movements, trends, historical processes. But in reality the power of an individual has long since been obvious. A monarch, for instance, can encourage education, build libraries, collect books, finance research and encourage free scientific enquiry, protecting the enquirer from persecution. Experiences in the twentieth century have more often shown the negative possibilities of individual power, and the danger in human readiness to submit to authority, although this readiness has been the inevitable result of natural selection. In his *Obedience to Authority* (London: Tavistock, 1974), S. Milgram notes that hierarchically organised groups have great advantages over undisciplined ones in coping with the dangers of the physical environment, with threats posed by competing species, and with potential disruption from within. In consequence, ‘a potential for obedience’ has been bred into the human organism. He finds, however, that these very virtues of loyalty, discipline and self-sacrifice bind individuals to malvolent systems of authority, leaving our species ‘in the long run only a modest chance of survival’.

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