

Cults of Personality: Power, Narcissism and Delusions

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We are living through a chronically tense and, in wealthy parts of the world, a desperately self-indulgent era. Advertising teaches that fulfillment comes with compulsive consumption. News media trivialize history and turn current events into a competition of spectacles and personality cults. Addicted to fads and the quick fix, frightened of the future and cut adrift from the past, millions of people flee from imagination and look for meaning in pre-digested realities.

The very sense that we are part of real families and communities is threatened. Virtual images that dominate our days begin to look more real than we do. Experts meanwhile have a field day providing clever evaluations of the psychic assault on humanity and the breakdown of culture, while conveniently omitting that they are some of the culprits.

Societal narcissism has reached the epidemic level. Traditionally, a narcissist was described as some “beautiful person” who can relate only to his or her own image or problems. But the definition has expanded to include traits like exploitation of the warmth provided by others, combined with fear of dependence, a sense of inner emptiness, boundless repressed rage, and unsatisfied cravings. Narcissists can be pseudo-intellectuals or calculating seducers. Usually, they are afraid of old age and death, and fascinated with celebrities. These callous, superficial climbers seek out the famous, and yet are also compelled to destroy their fantasy figures.

If this merely described a few “sick” individuals we might find comfort. But patterns of narcissistic behavior afflict millions and are reinforced daily. And perhaps most disquieting, the narcissistic personality is ideally suited for positions of power, the type of leader who sells himself to win at any price.

Capitalism has turned self promotion into a growth industry, with success often resting on the ability to project a “winning personality” and often false image. Relentless self-promotion, whether by conservative demagogues or their liberal counterparts, meshes neatly with an idealization of powerful people who represent what the narcissist seeks.

Narcissists identify with winners out of a fear of being losers. Objects of hero worship give meaning to the frequently unfocused or direction-deprived lives of society’s many emotional casualties. Yet mixed with this idealization is an urge to degrade the object of one’s admiration, sparked when the “hero” ultimately disappoints. This desperate need, intensified by the machinery of mass promotion, can turn even assassination, political or physical, into a form of spectacle.

Among the influences that reinforce narcissism, mass media have the most pervasive impact. They tend to create both a sense of chronic tension and a cynical detachment from reality. But detachment does not have to express itself as cynicism. It can also lead to intelligent skepticism. This raises a political question, since media and other powerful institutions could help to reduce dependence and support individuals in solving their own problems. In recent years, however, being detached has mainly meant a crippling negativism about the entire political process, a nihilistic and escapist conclusion that no constructive change is possible.

The abdication of responsibility to various bureaucracies has meanwhile promoted character traits consistent with a corrupted culture, and this in turn has accelerated the excesses of corporate capitalism. The result is a kind of mass neurosis. Images of a “good” and a “bad” parent, objects of love and hatred, are formed early, internalized, and become part of the self-image of children. But rather than fusing into a super-ego that also contains social values and self-confidence, these early images often melt into a harsh, punishing super-ego. The emerging adult is torn between repressed rage and the desire for some all-powerful other. Sexual needs are also distorted, barriers are erected against strong emotions, and fear of death and old age becomes intense.

The decay of older traditions of self-help has eroded competence in one area after another, leaving the individual dependent on the state, corporations, and other bureaucratic structures. Narcissism is the psychological dimension of this dependence. Popular culture feeds on narcissistic fantasies, encouraging delusions of omnipotence while simultaneously reinforcing feelings of dependence and discouraging strong emotions.

Ultimately, the bland and empty facade of mass existence can become overwhelming. Yet within millions of people there remains enormous rage, resentment, and potential for which bureaucratic society provides few outlets. In truth, few people are actually satisfied with the facade. Some do nothing yet know the system doesn’t work, others actively look for ways to limit the damage. Some strike out violently, others tap cultural resources like cooperative work, art, and spirituality to counteract the effects.

With the belief in individual responsibility undermined in so many ways, moral impulses help to keep alive a sense that people are responsible for what they do. If such a view spread widely enough, it could change an entire society. Another remedy, in response to professional imperialism, is to reclaim responsibilities we have ceded to the experts. Call it a program of conscious self-rule, one that could also protect us from discriminatory or authoritarian tendencies.

Such changes carry risks. For example, reactionary impulses in families or churches may be exploited. But given the state of society – moral bankruptcy, political corruption, economic inequality, and ecological decay – a few risks are preferable to playing it safe. The goal is to restore humanity’s basic dignity through compassion, engagement, and mutual aid. Along with healthy skepticism and intelligently directed anger, these could be keys to a new, freer and more natural culture.

Greg Guma is a Vermont-based writer and author of [Dons of Time](#). This essay is an excerpt from *Prisoners of the Real*. To read more, go to [Prisoners of the Real: An Odyssey](#)

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