The Eternal Magnetism of the Dictator: A Psychological Analysis

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PART ONE: THE PUZZLE, AND THE TRADITIONAL SOLUTIONS

1. The puzzle: why does dictatorship (in its various forms) persist? Varieties of 21st century dictatorships, presenting different faces to the world, claiming to represent the ‘interests of the people’ (Moghaddam, 2013).

2. How do we explain the surge of far-right movements in Europe? Austria and Poland lurching to extreme right? The continuation of Putin in power, return to ‘popular’ dictatorships in Turkey and Venezuela? The rise of another ‘New Emperor’ in China? Revolution in Iran, the Arab Spring, leading to continuation of dictatorships? Strong support for a potential dictator in the U.S.A? Recent declines of democracy and the free press according to objective measures, produced by Freedom House, Journalists Without Borders, and others?

3. The central role of psychology in solving this puzzle. The psychological foundations of political behavior, such as voting behavior, political participation, leader-follower relations, obedience, authoritarianism (Moghaddam, 2016).

4. The traditional psychoanalytic interpretation: Focus on irrationality, repression, and the unconscious. The basic Freudian model; the enormous costs of becoming civilized; alienation and atomism; link to existentialism; Fromm and Escape from Freedom.

5. Shortcomings of the traditional psychoanalytic model; the turn to modern research on (i) implicit processes studied through cognitive psychology, neuroscience, behavioral economics (ii) cultural continuity, studies in cultural psychology, narrative/discursive psychology. The resilience of factors both inside and outside individuals; ‘hard wiring’ as both within individuals and within cultures. Vygotsky and the dual nature of cognition.

For example, consider ‘categorization’ as a hard-wired cognitive process at the individual level, which also functions in society to influence group and inter-group dynamics. Categorization and the resilience of stereotyping regarding gender, ethnicity, and other types of groups.

PART TWO: INTRODUCING THE POLITICAL PLASTICITY MODEL

6. The Political Plasticity Model of political behavior focuses on processes of within-system and between-system change, as influenced by evolutionary developed (i) possibilities and limitations within individuals, plasticity and hard-wiring in the brain (ii) possibilities and limitations within cultures, plasticity and hard-wiring in cultures. The interplay and inter-dependency between individual-level change and change in the social world (meso and macro levels).

7. Hard-wiring and plasticity: The extensive research on neural plasticity and the absence of research on political plasticity (for discussions of political plasticity, see Moghaddam, 2018a; Moghaddam & Howard, 2017).

8. Questions about political plasticity go to the heart of debates in psychological science about the ‘nature of human nature’, what kind of ‘hard wiring’ are we born with and to what degree and how fast can we change political behavior. We can explore these questions by considering radical possibilities:
Example 1, could major societies function effectively without leaders? The technology is available to distribute decision-making power far more equally, but what kinds of psychological characteristics would humans need, to make such a society work well? Example 2, what are the limits to individual and collective incentives regarding ownership and profits? Related to this is research on ‘social loafing’ and ‘social laboring’ (Moghaddam, 2016), as well as real-world political experiments – U.S.S.R; China under Mao; Cuba.


10. Examples of research on implicit processes underlying political behavior: facial images and ‘political’ preferences (for discussion, see Moghaddam, 2016).

11. Examples of research on hard-wiring in cultures: stratification and unequal power distributions, across age and gender.

12. Ongoing research: I am developing the Political Plasticity Model of political behavior, focusing on the psychological foundations of limits and possibilities of political change. For example, as applied to revolution, the model explores change and mutual radicalization (Moghaddam, 2018b) over the course of six stages: (i) collective mobilization to achieve regime change (ii) ruler resistance to regime change (iii) regime collapse (iv) post-revolution opportunity-bubble to achieve system change (v) limitations to how much and how fast cognitions and actions can be brought in line with system change goals (vi) establishment of new ruling regime, limited by the actual cognitive and behavioral style limitations of leaders and followers.

References (all listed books available through Amazon.com)


