

Cultural Analysis

The American psychoanalytic community seems to have left intrinsic morality out of its understanding of *culture*: what Freud called *civilization*. In decades of assessing psychoanalytic change, Arnold Richards described a widening chasm between Freud's depiction of sexual and aggressive drive regulated by innate culture, and generations of followers who modified Freud's work toward self-reflection. (1) At present most analysts offer therapeutic alliance to those who want to get ahead, oblivious to ordinary people and detached from the poor. If Freud's *guilty man* gave way to *tragic man* of our time, then psychoanalysts offer how to join the elite, not how to care for suffering communities. A Weltanschauung of pleasure in quality of life overrides concern that collective aggression unbinds through cultural regression.

The legal concept of self today extends in an authoritarian frame as corporate self, a fascist and self-centered rationalization. As I write this, President Trump wishes to legalize pardoning himself as national corporate president. After all, Steve Bannon, his chief strategist, collaborated on bringing Citizens United's argument to the Supreme Court that led to the corporate right to free speech under the first amendment. Bannon's Breitbart Press showed conservative Republicans how to use alt-right thinking to influence elections. The corporate self under American law can over-match ordinary persons and whistle-blowers in the outcome of litigation: people sign off their rights before using most corporate offerings. That impressive narcissistic trick is as influential as Russian trickle-down in the American election of 2016.

Viewing cultural regression as akin to Kohut's image of primary narcissism, let's assess corporate projection into culture. Bannon got Trump to put him into the National Security Council (NSC) for the White House, like putting the fox into the henhouse. Given law as collective morality, the NSC should safeguard American culture with its superego judgment. Our institutions represent culture as an evolution of the human brain projected into a shared world. Freud expressed this view when he studied how human stages of brain development were repeated in the development of culture itself. A primary narcissist will use any means to take what he wants—like a two year old with power. The projected cultural power of a shared institutional brain must provide necessary regulation of the leader's, e.g. President's, potential narcissistic power to ruin culture: just as the inhibitory right brain controls the left brain's pleasure. Freud warned against the American tendency to turn psychoanalysis into an elite therapy for the wealthy, by the wealthy. When a President projects primal narcissism he destroys democratic power.

During cultural regression, the people try to maintain their quality of life, while sociopaths aim for only their advantage, while the common people care for family, tribe, or religion. Trump won nomination by attacking every competitor's selfish tricks, besting them in their habitual Republican strategy to take over the nation's resources. He was more overtly dramatic in projecting his avoidance of humiliation by projecting it onto his adversaries. Many of the subcultures that supported Trump felt relegated by neglect, bias, or attack to an ongoing life of suffering and humiliation. Narcissistic sociopaths enact their own imposturous identity, by appealing to syndromatic phantasies of reparation and revenge among subculture voters who live in the throes of cultural syndromes. Trump accelerates world cultures further into regression, by using his imposturous identity and

false economic and political language to disparage truth, as if winning with lies and projections is morally correct.

In an age of narcissism protracted beyond Freud's lifetime, media moved beyond bringing news to the world and became the purveyors of culture. There is a *mélange* of truth and falsehood competing for attention, and many people are confused. Now, media can sell false cultural news for profit. So-called media experts can knowingly rationalize *economic logic* (falsifying anticipated debt by exaggerating the future economy), *political truth* (authoritarianism as a form of democracy), and *real news* (alt-right fake events), which undermines collective belief in what the law stands for, which leads to cultural regression. Mature narcissists, who purvey policy by reflecting on logical economics, real politics, and real events, are treated as enemies by oligarchs and would be oligarchs who steal survival from the disenfranchised. They couch lies, false ideals, fake morality, and God's work in words of human care. As Trump pursued corporate control, Bannon and Scaramucci persuaded him for a while to say that a meltdown of a bad health care system resurrects a healthy system. Destroying state department negotiation uses the same logic, as if sound and fury signify a winning hand.

What role should psychoanalysis play in understanding regressive cultural syndromes? I believe analytic institutes should teach causes, formative processes, and emotional dynamics of cultural syndromes, in addition to neurotic, psychotic, organic, and personality syndromes. Just as Freud turned psychoanalysis toward helping anyone who could repair their own culture after the lessons of WW1, so psychoanalysis today must demonstrate its relevance to the other cultural disciplines that teach multicultural identity. To this end in *Minding the Social Brain* I laid out a neuropsychanalytic base for multi-

disciplinary cultural development (2013) (2). My new book extends cultural analysis as a discipline in its own right (3) Arnold Richards had this to say:

“This important work follows Harris’ previous highly regarded book *Minding the Social Brain*. It is in the spirit of Ludwick Fleck who contends that scientific contributions are influenced by social, historical, cultural, psychological and personal determinants. He makes a very convincing case that Freud’s work was impacted by all those factors. It is a brilliant exposition - a psychoanalytic tour de force.”—**Arnold Richards**, New York Psychoanalytic Institute

How Culture Runs the Brain: A Freudian View of Collective Syndromes (4)

presents neuroscience findings, revealing fantasy as the brain’s *default mode*, as it alters identity during stress. I use case histories of syndromatic cultural conflicts among individuals, tribes, and nations, including as examples the Boston Marathon Bombers, Bowe Bergdahl’s iconic trial, the Orlando shooter, and regressive American players in the election of 2016 and its aftermath in 2017. Conflicting forms of cultural narcissism influence world-wide economic development: the immature narcissism of Trump and his associates attacked the mature narcissism of Hillary Clinton’s elitist hubris in order to become kings of the hill. Some terrorist leaders use global technology to sell revolution. Immature narcissistic oligarchs act out economic dominance to deal with the fear of extinction of their own identity.

Arnold Richard’s reference to Ludwick Fleck got me to familiarize myself with his writing. Having the internet at hand revealed to me that Fleck lived out the concept of collective intersubjectivity among those who use their reflection to learn from one another and to apply their thinking to technological innovation. He realized that medical innovation used collective styles of thinking. My book explores Freud’s belief in a *collective unconscious*, what he felt he shared with Fliess and Jung, and unwittingly with his baby brother Julius who died before he was two. Seemingly innate shared thinking remained a narcissistic attachment to irrational source of innate knowledge—what some worship in anthropomorphized religion. If we do not have to live with an imago that becomes a fantasy of self-persona, we can keep

it free and clear of overt aggression, like an inner muse for writing. Perhaps that is what Fleck did to remain immune from hateful paranoia in two years away from peers, cut off from them in the Buchenwald Camp. Freud too kept a deep belief in the elite who are in a position to sublimate their mutual narcissistic love for the sake of culture.

Freud thought mind and brain evolved together, adapting progressively to cultural change; responding regressively to wars, genocides, and forced migrations. Freud traced the innate conflicts between pleasure and aggression during each stage of individual development to corresponding development in cultural stages. Cultural trauma that induces PTSD with a loss of secure identity in one generation induces collective *phantasies* (mythologies) among succeeding generations to form cultural syndromes of revenge and restitution. Communities can regress together to childhood stages that breed heroes, sociopaths, revolutionaries—and potential terrorists vulnerable to the siren call of internet shamans.

Above all, Freud wanted to understand the intersections among brain, mind, and culture. But the brain is not just a set of distinct neuronal zones, like a Rubix cube of conditioned ego functions that maintain thinking states for self-pleasure and physical survival. The cognitive story has a logical base, but the emotional story has to monitor and respond to a lack of prediction, changes in cultural input, or even traumatic situations that block the narcissistic self, which is the source of autonomy. Freud knew that the left hemisphere deals with the pleasure that rewards a person who maintains the predictable, familiar, even addictive behavior necessary for metabolic survival. My recent books explore how this works: the right brain maintains survival through its emotional, affective response to the external world when predictability fails.

Neuropsychologists view the human brain as a predictive instrument dealing with the future. Reflecting on related events, scientifically minded people use the fruits of their

reflection to pose theories of cause. Employing that kind of reflection to assess how cultures interact and change, I conclude in *How culture Run the Brain* that traumatic, near-death experience of self and loved ones—let alone actual loss—leads to PTSD and grief that cannot be worked through, which causes families to enter syndromic states of revenge and restitution. Would-be heroes growing up in syndromic families may enact those phantasies as revolutionaries.

Interactive Disciplines

World-wide cultural regression affects everyone's quality of life and expectations about death. But that regression is multi-determined: to deal with it we can reflect on what each discipline understands about how to maintain a collective, satisfactory quality of life.

How the brain processes information through neural activation and inhibition has become a major influence on the whole world economy. Emulating cognitive research on brain learning through experience, machines produce economically influential algorithms based on putative connections among past data records. Joining the elite through internet connections is the pathway for *me-generation*, millennials. Their home base is in internet-based corporations, especially the iconic FANGs (Facebook, Amazon, Netflix, and Google), economic drivers of contemporary wealth. But there is a down side to economic singularity (artificial super intelligence). Sociopaths can win the competitions.

Not only does machine-based learning breed robots that take human jobs, but the use of increasingly intricate machines morphs into an evolving language no longer familiar to past generations who still compete for the dwindling resources of the present and future. Elites and oligarchs take an increasing portion of wealth for themselves, their families, cohorts, foundations, and trickle-downs, leaving less for everyone else. But resources also dwindle because false data ruins economic principles. Nations use statistics of

commerce and rates of growth in the real economy based on globally competitive trade, which determines world-wide economic benchmarks. The reliable strength of the U.S. dollar is the world's benchmark for world trade. If global business reaches a point in which too much of the global economy exists in transactions outside of data (which can be the case in over-use of sanctions), then regulations become feckless, leading to economic regression.

Does the Future Stop?

How does the brain deal with unrelenting strangeness? Consider a continuum: mild surprise, frustration, disappointment, vigilance, terror. Stanislaus Dehaene's global neuronal workplace views self-need as the source of consciousness. (4) When working memory is thwarted, people seek alternative ways to find needed satisfaction. The limbic system automatically searches for the source of failure. When learning is blocked during the experience of mistakes, or a change in the way things work, altered expectations elicit fantasy (self-consciousness) as a means of finding alternative consciousness, such as the way someone else thinks. What is now called *default mode* thinking is preconscious, organized in private thoughts not meant for immediate communication. In my new book I explore what distinguishes cognitive learning (conditioning), from default thinking (preconscious fantasy), from emergency thinking (perplexity).

In situations of stress, hormonal and phenotypical effects impact the brain more holistically. How does the brain switch thinking modes during prolonged periods of changed circumstances? Reflecting on this question, I found a fresh spate of online abstracts about how prefrontal and hippocampal areas show diverse response to new experience taking weeks to integrate as causal reflection and actual new memory. While

scientists rush to find evidence for unexpected causes of brain events, I think reflective awareness and long-term-memory of portentous events spreads unevenly among hundreds of brain areas. In an analogous way, thousand of world-wide researchers rush to find their next discovery. That is an example of multiple disciplines affecting technology of the future. Perhaps new understanding shows up in default mode fantasy of many people, when events change expectations of what is thought real and causal. Perhaps without a sense of future in the left hippocampus, regulating time neurons, there is no self-consciousness.

Persistent unexpected threat or unbearable loss puts the brain into a state of disturbed consciousness, which may trigger a blockade of experience, even of associated imagery related to trauma: PTSD brings familiar self-need into ongoing perplexity. Consider how astroglia cells in the brain (at least as numerous as the neurons) regulate neural adaptation when the brain fails in prediction. Glial forerunners of neurons support the function of every neuron much like servants, without which each neuron would be helpless in adapting its function. Astroglia, with their star-shaped pseudopods wrapping a neuron, regulate its synapses to fire or not to fire, evoking necessary changes when behavior no longer fulfills metabolic needs or assessments about how to stay safe. The astroglia are crucially important to cognitive psychology, since neural reconditioning occurs every day and continues in every night's sleep. Astroglia are like chemical factories that not only feed or block functions of their neuron attachment, but are also the source of glucose provision during needed extra energy. Their slow brain process, once overlooked by brain imaging results as irrelevant noise, is now being explored as a field of inquiry in its own right. Ketterman and Verkhratasky put it this way:

“...the pathological importance of neuroglia in general and astroglia in particular remains fragmentary, because of a long-lasting prevalence of neurocentric views in neurology and neuropathology.” (5)

Glial change in the brain's control of life processes responds to the physiological milieu by monitoring the blood stream as neurovascular mediators of the brain. One side of an astroglia attaches to a capillary, the other side to a neuron. But by facilitating connections that process changes in sensory reception, glial mechanisms also become a source of several chronic brain syndromes. In Alzheimer's dementia, neuroglia destroy synaptic connections in a process that may come to massively destroy neurons. Glial tau proteins and amyloid deposits destroy highly active neurons of the prefrontal cortex and hippocampus. The neurons of the default domain, which deal with the unpredicted, are the most vulnerable.

One would expect that a patient with severe Parkinsonism or Alzheimer's would become terrified by fantasies that can no longer be tested against the sense that self has a future. Just months ago, my sister came down with Alzheimer's as her career as a prominent psychologist came to an end. She called me in terror asking how it could be that after the morning grew light, the world became dark as night again. She remembered that when we were children, I had wanted to become a weatherman to predict when disaster might strike like a Minnesota storm. She had lost the capacity to know time passing to the future. Going to bed very early, she woke in the evening during her first REM period, before the sun had yet set, on a summer night. Opening her eyes, she saw it was eight o'clock—and thought it was morning.

It is common for people with Alzheimer's not to be able to anticipate the future or make plans that require knowing what time to meet, for their working memory self no longer can know the future as it comes to pass. Besides my grief beginning in earnest, I imagined the event in terms of brain function. I think her hippocampus and prefrontal cortex had gradually become functionally detached, by her Alzheimer's astroglia. But there is only so much relief that can be afforded by knowing or imagining cause and effect.

Economic, political, sociological, historical, anthropological, and other cultural effects contend in each person's mind. Interdisciplinary communication (mediated by peers, lobbyists, interest groups, foundations, corporate voices, etc.) interpreted by the media balances these effects. For instance, consider the healthcare budgetary effects of people living longer and developing dementia; and the effect of those born with autism entitled to public funding; and of those unable to work because of psychosis, personality disorder, or addiction (My family forces me to consider all these effects). The needs of these cohorts contribute to political and economic conflicts about spending for health care; as media and contending subcultures disagree about which segments of the population have a stronger claim to determining the resolution of these conflicts. Decimated subcultures are often the ones abiding by tribal and religious morality requiring families to be as cohesive, and as large as possible—if some of these families under generations of duress become syndromatic carriers of revenge, then evolution may be catching up with us.

Psychoanalysts, like members of any discipline, bear moral responsibility for relating to their culture, and remaining alert to the subculture of patients, students, and each other. I would like to hear from you.

References

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