

An Authoritarian or a Madman?

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By Elizabeth Mika and Frederick Burkle

Professor Ruth Ben-Ghiat's *WaPo* opinion piece from Nov. 30, *No, Trump is not a madman — because he knows exactly what he's doing*, posits that Trump's not a madman but an authoritarian. She says that the historical framework of authoritarianism, rather than psychology and psychopathology, is best used to explicate the Trump/ism phenomenon.

We would like to add that this framework, although useful and necessary, is incomplete without understanding the psychology and psychopathology of the strongmen, their followers, and societies that enable their rise. Even though the question of strongmen/tyrants' "madness" keeps coming up with cyclical regularity in discussions about tyrants past and present, it has never received a satisfactory response. It also has never been fully applied to an American leader until now (for good reasons).

One of us, Dr. Burkle, is a psychiatrist by training (among other specialties) and has a long and distinguished record of working the world over for humanitarian and peace causes, which involved diplomatic dealings with various strongmen in power, including Saddam Hussein. He has studied the psychology of strongmen and written a seminal paper about it, noting the increase in their numbers since the Cold War, which, not surprisingly, corresponds to the spread of fascistic ideologies all over the world today. The co-author, raised under an oppressive

political system in Eastern Europe and trained as a clinical psychologist, has authored a chapter on *Tyranny as a Triumph of Narcissism* in the recently published NYT bestseller, "The Dangerous Case of Donald Trump."

We maintain that the knowledge of psychology, and specifically psychopathology of the autocrats/tyrants and their followers, is crucial to grasping the rise, development, and inevitable fall of tyrants and the socio-political movements they inspire and lead. This knowledge is also necessary to create the shared understanding of conditions that give rise to fascism and other oppressive political movements, as they are all built on the same fundamental individual and collective psychopathology, fueled by specific socio-political factors. Such understanding, we hope, will help prevent development of these movements in our future and make the world a safer, better place.

Studying biographies of strongmen/tyrants shows that they all share the same essential character structure, or more accurately a character defect (disorder): a severely impaired conscience — which makes them unable to experience pro-social emotions like empathy, guilt and shame, and understand higher human values — combined with an insatiable drive for power and adulation. A clinical name for this specific character structure, which is not mental illness, is narcissistic psychopathy, also known in its extreme form as malignant narcissism (which is comprised of paranoia, sadism and Machiavellianism, in addition to narcissism and psychopathy). Neither term is included as a diagnostic category in DSM, and there are some mental health experts who don't believe that narcissistic psychopathy or malignant narcissism constitute pathological conditions. Some see them as just garden-variety "badness."

Nevertheless, it is a specific character disorder with well described symptomatology and prognosis, which allow us to recognize it and predict its progression inevitably leading to dire outcomes for the afflicted individual's behaviors, those around him and the society at large. In fact, understanding the psychology or rather psychopathology of the strongman/tyrant-wannabe and that of his supporters has allowed us to correctly predict Trump's presidential win, along with the subsequent general political developments, in early 2016.

Strongmen differ in their individual personality characteristics, but they share essential easily recognizable core features, specifically the aforementioned deficits of conscience and an abiding and insatiable desire for power and adulation.

Not all strongmen turn tyrants; those who do exhibit unusually high levels of narcissism of the malignant type characterized by sadism and paranoia. Once the strongman/tyrant-wannabe achieves the ultimate position of power, these malignant characteristics intensify, leading to what we call psychological decompensation. His grandiose expectations balloon, along with his sense of aggrieved entitlement and rage when they are frustrated, which happens sooner or later. The rage fuels his paranoid distrust of others and the compulsive (sadistic) need to hurt them. With time and progressing decompensation, no one is immune to the tyrant's escalating

rage. This is when his pathology becomes most apparent, although his sycophants and enablers are the last ones to notice it (or at least to admit it), invested as they are in placating him and protecting their privileged positions or even lives.

Bereft of a conscience and driven by the insatiable need to dominate others and avenge their non-ending humiliations, real and imagined, strongmen/tyrants are compulsively and sadistically vindictive. This assures that whenever they achieve ultimate power, a destruction of democratic institutions will follow, leading to chaos, disorder, oppression and eventually bloody conflicts. It's not a matter of *if* it happens, but how soon.

We have delineated the specifics of the narcissistic psychopath's psychological functioning elsewhere. Dr. Burkle's seminal 2016 paper on *Antisocial Personality Disorder and Pathological Narcissism in Prolonged Conflicts and Wars of the 21st Century* talks about political leaders with this character pathology and notes the increase in their numbers since the Cold War. Not coincidentally, this increase corresponds to the current rise in fascistic movements world over.

Prof. Ben-Ghiat goes on to describe the main features of the authoritarian strongman's pathology — his disruptiveness, shape-shifting, a proclivity toward violence, and disregard for norms and values— which in the right socio-political context, that of widespread inequality and growing social unrest, as well as shared narcissistic woundedness that stems from frustrated expectations of collective and individual greatness, become his assets.

The strongman/tyrant-wannabe's withdrawal from our shared reality into his own version of it, suffused with a grandiose sense of entitlement and eternal victimhood, and seasoned with dreams of redemptive glory and punishment for his manufactured enemies, appeals to the segment of the population that feels similarly aggrieved and looking for scapegoats onto which they can unload their misery. The tyrant-in-the-making would not amount to much if it weren't for his supporters who see in him the embodiment of their own hopes for the settling of scores, avenging their humiliations and restoring their personal power.

This is the case where narcissistic pathology of an individual colludes with the needs of his similarly afflicted supporters. This process of narcissistic collusion is what fuels the growth of anti-democratic parties as well as cults and other destructive social movements. Such movements eventually fall, as do their leaders, crippled by their own pathology, specifically by unchecked grandiosity and paranoia that drive them to commit acts of political suicide and /or destruction evoking pushback and rebellion.

Ben-Ghiat is right that the behavior of strongmen in general is methodical in that it is designed to achieve a specific goal: maximize power and adulation, and minimize resistance and personal humiliations. It is not quite rational, however, as the needs for power and adulation driving it are insatiable and because of that ultimately lead to destruction of others and usually himself as well. His behaviors, even though purposeful and effective in helping him achieve his goals, something that renders the label of "madness" questionable in many observers' eyes, are not normal, and certainly not healthy. While such adjectives like *mad* and *crazy*, strictly indicating a

psychotic break with reality driven by delusions and hallucinations, may not necessarily apply to the strongman's functioning, certainly not at all times, his incurable character defect makes him not only mentally unhealthy but also dangerous.

Where "madness" is concerned, it is crucial to note that one can be abnormal without being mentally ill. Not having a conscience – a main feature of psychopathy — is not an illness but a defect, still an abnormality, just like not having a limb would be considered an abnormality but not an illness. Psychopaths are not "mad" in the colloquial (or even clinical) sense of the word — their reality testing is intact and they are capable of effective, goal-oriented functioning in the world. Being free of scruples and treating other people as objects to exploit turns out to be an asset in the world that champions greed and the pursuit of power. There is logic, consistency, and predictability in their actions, and they can be seen as reasonable from the point of view of realization of their personal objectives and an effective adjustment to — and/or exploitation of — a society where primitive goals rule.

It is important to remember, as difficult as it may be to accept, that the problematic behavior of a narcissistic psychopath in a position of ultimate power will not change for the better, but will most certainly grow worse with time. We know that he will be destructive. We know that he will sow chaos, legitimize and incite violence, and quite likely start wars. We know that with the help of his always eager sycophants and supporters, he will dismantle anything that stands in his way to power, and that includes institutions, norms and values that support human civilization. Eventually this destruction will also reach many, if not most of his supporters, especially if they fail to provide him with the adulation and obedience he craves.

The debate about mental un/health of the current occupant of the White House as well as strongmen/tyrants in general is a good opportunity for educating our society about still poorly recognized dangers of conscience-impairing character defects like narcissistic psychopathy and malignant narcissism. If there is one lesson that we should be able to learn already, based on our historical and psychological knowledge, it is that of the necessity of keeping individuals with these defective characters away from power. That is because once they achieve a position of ultimate power, there isn't much that can be done to prevent the predictable destruction they unleash on society.

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