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Paranoia and Political Leadership

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With good reason, political psychologists might be paranoid to relate paranoia to political leadership. First, the very concept, like other hypothetical constructs, may not have valid ontological status, being merely something perceived as useful to derive meaning from the world and as if it were a human trait or process--human traits and processes being still other hypothetical constructs. Second, it may be a vehicle to reinforce, fragment, or avoid interpersonal relationships, depending on the degree of shared consensus over criteria for its denotative and connotative meanings and over conventions for its social usage. Third, it is heavily but not necessarily linked to psychodynamic theories, postulates of the unconscious, and the defense mechanism of projection. These last all have their own ontological problems and still elicit bemusement and incredulosity among many adherents of other schools of psychology, e.g., the cognitive and behaviorist.

Yet the concept of paranoia continues to be employed by politicians and their analysts (pace, political) as well as by mental health professionals. For example, Aleksa Djilas in bemoaning the political fate of his father, Milovan Djilas, the great Serbian military, political, intellectual, and moral leader, has stated, "We are cursed with this terrible megalomania--and paranoia that in the end is the same illness. When people think they have an extraordinary mission in life, then they also believe that everyone is pursuing them." (See Hedges (1997.)) The problem with employment of paranoia to formal political leaders as opposed to most of the rest of us who are lay politicians is that what goes with the territory of the former largely obviates illustrations of paranoia's nonadaptiveness.

How so? From the various editions of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders of the American Psychiatric Association and the International Classification of Diseases, paranoia seems to comprise having a (1) pervasive and unwarranted tendency to interpret the actions of people as deliberately demeaning, threatening, or malevolent; (2) general expectation of being exploited or harmed by others; (3) penchant to question without justification the loyalty or trustworthiness of friends or associates; (4) hypervigilance for taking precautions against any perceived threat; (5) trait constellation of being guarded, secretive, devious, and scheming; (6) history of transient ideas of reference, e.g., that others are taking special notice of them, or saying vulgar things about them; and (7) in more severe cases, false social belief that is resistant to change from disconfirming information.

And now to the politician's world. (1) Certainly there are threatening, demeaning, and malevolent people out there. What is the accurate base rate from which political psychologists can estimate whether one will have the lowest combination of false positive and false negative errors by viewing all people in this manner? (2) Politics is all about variants of conflict management. And towards this conflict, one can make a strong case that most politicians believe in the zero sum game nature of the world. (If their belief is considered a paranoid delusion, the same judgment would apply to the many social scientists who use variants of game theory to explicate social life and to further their careers through such explication.) Therefore, one must seek to exploit or harm and expect the same from others, much like investing one's capital to ward off ineluctable loss in a world of high inflation. (3) Questioning the loyalty and trustworthiness of friends and associates as nonadaptive? Wouldn't it seem more bizarre to assume that others are placing your needs above their own? Yes, some people vouch to

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place other needs before their own in the service of God. But if one has to therefore assume one is either God or that one's needs and God's needs are congruent to rest easy about the motivations of others, then we have indeed arrived at the megalomaniac delusions--if not the paranoia--referred to by Djilas. Anticipating the designs of Brutus may be healthier than anticipating those of Judas. (4) Much as total dedication to the service of one's country may not be a vice, hypervigilance in an environment of ongoing real and potential crisis may not be paranoid. (It may, however, be less than the most efficient and effective style of crisis management.) (5) Being guarded, secretive, devious, and scheming in a world of instantaneous information transmission, sophisticated surveillance, and evermore complex encryption and counterencryption activities seems to be especially adaptive. It is becoming more and more difficult to develop comical examples of paranoid delusions as their content becomes more and more likely. (6) In a world where people are blaming their leaders for anything from the weather to the loss in competition of a sports team, and there is literally constant plotting to seize and protect power, does an idea of reference even remain meaningful in the political sphere? (7) And how to differentiate a false social belief from the biases--racial and otherwise--that are characteristic of most people?

To counter the above, one might state that the paranoid leader is one whose mental and behavioral life leads to personal and national tragedy. But given that such tragedy occurs often enough for many nonparanoid leaders, how does one establish the singular nonadaptiveness of paranoia--or even any causal linkage?

These comments apply in varying degrees to all of us, and it is the special situation of the formal political leader that renders the concept of paranoia especially problematic as an explanatory or causal variable. (See Author. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association; Begelman, D. A. (1991.) *Virtual reality and virtual mistakes: A comment on Tart. Dissociation: Progress in the Dissociative Disorders*, 4, 214-215; Birt, R. (1993.) *Personality and foreign policy: The case of Stalin*. *Political Psychology*, 14, 607-625; Harper, D.J. (1996.) *Deconstructing "paranoia": Towards a discursive understanding of apparently unwarranted suspicion*. *Theory and Psychology*, 6, 423-448; Hedges, C. (January 19, 1997.) *Critic of Tito is scorned by a new class of Serbs*. *The New York Times*. p. 6Y.) (Keywords: Leadership, paranoia)