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Trends. After the Deluge: Psychology and Post-Totalitarianism

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Abstract: This Trends article discusses the psychological impacts – both positive and negative - of the transition from totalitarian rule in Iraq following the US-led military intervention against Saddam Hussein's regime.

One element of public discourse on the United States (US)-led military intervention against Saddam Hussein's regime focuses on the psychological reaction of the Iraqi people (those not being part of the Iraqi political elite) to regime change. At first, typical mass media reports suggested a dearth of expected huzzahs for the US troops and a conclusion that the people would rather resonate with nationalism--not supporting Saddam Hussein, but defending a sense of being Iraqi. Then the reports suggested an undercurrent of support for the US that was being held down by fears of retribution from the Saddam Hussein regime. As of this writing, pro-US support is being manifest much more overtly and broadly. But the Issue remains: what kind of psychological phenomena might be experienced by a construct, the Iraqi people in the aftermath of military operations? (Such phenomena might be identified premised on noting that there would be no one reaction and that different and similar people might react in different and similar ways. Also, different and similar phenomena might well wax and wane within, between, and among different people.)

A look at the reaction of people after events as disparate as regime change after the demise of the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc, the apartheid regime of the Republic of South Africa, Nazi Germany, fascist Italy, and Iran under the Shah suggests there are two groups of phenomena. In the eyes of many observers throughout the world, one group might be termed Expected and Positive, the other Unexpected and Negative.

Expected and Positive. Many people might be almost euphoric with beliefs that now there would be more freedom of speech, assembly, and association and more opportunity to take one's own course in life and to be successful on one's own terms. Also, a common reaction would be that anything else perceived as bad associated with the old regime would soon be no more.

Unexpected and Negative. Because all that was bad cannot be made good and because some desired expectations would be unreasonable, initial positive reactions to the change in regime could soon dissipate and fester into the negative--even encompassing sullenness and rage. Second, many individuals living under a totalitarian regime at least partially identify with the regime. When the regime crumbles, it is as if part of the psychological self does as well. This can be experienced as threatening and can generate fear and unease--in analogous fashion to abused children and spouses. Third, some individuals will have been traumatized through totalitarianism so that they cannot adequately function in a freer society. They would prefer the old bad to the newer potential for good that would be perceived as even worse than the old bad--again in analogous fashion to abused children and spouses. Fourth, as time goes on, the daily hassles and unfortunate occurrences that go with any life in any situation would be more likely to be associated with the new regime. This would generate more negative reactions to it.

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Most of the above in attenuated form would characterize the coming to power of a new political candidate among the candidate's supporters in representative democracies--or even the beginnings of a promising job or personal relationship. Thus, we should recognize part of ourselves in the contemporary scenes of Iraqi jubilation and discontents. (See Battegay, R. (2000). Individual responsibility versus archaic group dynamics in national and international politics. *Archives of Psychiatry & Psychotherapy*, 2, 5-15; Gluzman, S. (2001). Law and psychiatry: The totalitarian experience. *Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry & the Law*, 29, 330-335; Markova, I., Moodie, E., Farr, R. M., Drozda-Senkowska, E., Eroes, F., Plichtova, J., Gervais, M-C, Hoffmannova, J., & Mullerova, O. (1998). Social representations of the individual: A post-Communist perspective. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 28, 797-829; Sebek, M. (1998). Posttotalitarian personality--Old internal objects in a new situation. *Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis*, 26, 295-309.)