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Trends. Psychology of the Alienated and Political Violence

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Abstract: This Trends article discusses alienation and the psychology of the alienated in literature (Camus and Dostoevsky) and society.

Public discourse on political violence—especially terrorism—often posits or implies that socially marginal and alienated individuals are more likely to be the perpetrators. Classical Western literary works may also reinforce this notion even if the violence perpetrated may not be deemed political. Cases in point are two murderers—the Mersault of Camus and the Raskolnikov of Dostoyevsky. But even if attributions of blame for political violence to the alienated are overwrought and misguided, the psychology of the alienated is one that political authorities contemplating the threats of destabilization, subversion, insurrection, and the like often consider.

In the above context, a recent study by Twenge et al. (2003) offers a psychological pathway to the alienated through experimental data on individuals who are socially excluded. The authors hypothesized that socially excluded individuals “...enter a defensive state of cognitive deconstruction that avoids meaningful thought, emotion, and self-awareness, and is characterized by lethargy and altered time flow.” The authors found that social exclusion as operationally defined through a social rejection paradigm led to “an overestimation of time intervals, a focus on the present rather than the future, and a failure to delay gratification....[led to more likely agreement] that ‘Life is meaningless’....[led to writing] fewer words and displayed slower reaction times....[led to choosing] fewer emotion words in an implicit emotion task....[that replicated] the lack of emotion on explicit measures....[and led to an attempt to] escape from self-awareness by facing away from a mirror.

What the authors are providing is an empirical foundation of a phenomenology of alienation that might have value social and, specifically, political application. A useful endpoint may be an understanding of phenomenology that generates hypotheses bearing on the subjective satisfaction of such people and their objective value to their social context. Given that social exclusion perceived by the excluded as social rejection and coupled with narcissism may be a strong predictor of potential for violence (cf. Twenge & Campbell, 2003), only the tenuous assumption that the human as social animal has no need of or responsibility for others could challenge this endpoint. (See Goldstone, J. A., & Useem, B. (1999). Prison riots as microrevolutions: An extension of state-centered theories of revolution. *American Journal of Sociology*, 104, 985-1029; Southwell, P. L., & Everest, M. J. (1998). The electoral consequences of alienation: Nonvoting and protest voting in the 1992 presidential race. *Social Science Journal*, 35, 43-51; Twenge, J. M., & Campbell, W. K. (2003). "Isn't it fun to get the respect that we're going to deserve?" Narcissism, social rejection, and aggression. *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin*, 29, 261-272; Twenge, J. M., Catanese, K. R., & Baumeister, R. F. (2003). Social Exclusion and the Deconstructed State: Time Perception, Meaninglessness, Lethargy, Lack of Emotion, and Self-Awareness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 85, 409-423.) (Keywords: Alienation, Albert Camus, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Literature, Political Violence.)