How to make enemies and influence people: anatomy of the anti-pluralist, totalitarian mindset

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Abstract

This essay outlines the characteristics of what I call the ‘totalitarian mindset’. Under certain circumstances, human beings engage in patterns of thinking and behavior that are extremely closed and intolerant of difference and pluralism. These patterns of thinking and behaving lead us towards totalitarian, anti-pluralistic futures. An awareness of how these patterns arise, how individuals and groups can be manipulated through the use of fear, and how totalitarianism plays into the desire in human beings for ‘absolute’ answers and solutions, can be helpful in preventing attempts at manipulation and from the dangers of actively wanting to succumb to totalitarian, simplistic, black-and-white solutions in times of stress and anxiety. I present a broad outline of an agenda for education for a pluralistic future. The lived experience of pluralism is still largely unfamiliar and anxiety inducing, and that the phenomenon is generally not understood, with many myths of purity and racial or cultural superiority still prevalent. Finally, as part of that agenda for education, I stress the importance of creativity as an adaptive capacity, an attitude that allows us to see pluralism as an opportunity for growth and positive change rather than simply conflict.

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Naturally, the common people do not want war, but after all, it is the leaders of a country who determine the policy, and it is always a simple matter to drag people along whether it is a democracy, or a fascist dictatorship, or a parliament, or a communist dictatorship. Voice or no voice, the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. This is easy. All you have to do is to tell them they are being attacked, and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same in every country.

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Hermann Goering, in *Nuremberg Diary* by Gustave Gilbert (1947).
Rarely is the question asked: Is our children learning?
George W. Bush

1. Introduction

Why is it easy, as Goering writes, to get people to do the bidding of their leaders? How was it possible for a sophisticated, educated population like Germany’s to follow blindly the dictates of a maniacal leader, and to embark on the horrors of the Nazi regime? How did leaders like Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Mussolini, and others manage to amass so much power and support, and so completely win over huge percentages of their populations that to outsiders, and on hindsight, it seems like they were all participating in a collective consensus trance? How can young men be made to believe that suicide-bombings of civilians are God’s work? How can a pluralistic future be safeguarded from what appears to be the human tendency to get lost in a homogenized whole that must destroy human beings who are different, rather than engage them constructively? Why do human beings seem so eager to believe, to wrap themselves around the flag and fall lock-step in line with a black-and-white, simplistic belief system espoused by a strong leader?

Arthur Koestler [37] argued that it was not humanity’s self-assertive side that is most destructive, but its capacity for self-transcendence, for losing itself in a greater whole and following orders emerging from a closed belief-system. In this paper I explore this capacity for seeking out the consensus trance, how this trance is a profound obstacle to pluralistic futures, and how this tendency can be counteracted.

2. The global context

In his 1992 article *Jihad versus McWorld*, Barber [5] presents two global futures that can be summarized as homogenization versus fragmentation. Neither future is particularly appetizing. One is a unity made up of whitewashed white-bread monoculture, the other a diversity of endless breakdowns and internecine wars, skirmishes and general hostilities. Either we all lose our identity in unity, or our diversity will lead to endless war. But in both cases, the existence of cultural and religious pluralism (what might be called descriptive pluralism) is given. In the case of McWorld homogenization, the issue is the elimination of pluralism through global capitalism. In the case of Global Jihad, pluralism means differences that inevitably lead to war. Are these anti-pluralist futures the only ones open to us? Or are they rather the manifestation of an anti-pluralist, totalitarian mindset that is unable to deal with the complexity and uncertainty of a pluralistic world, and seeks to drastically reduce difference?

Difference and exchange present the possibility for learning, creativity, development, and growth. Indeed, it has been argued convincingly that pluralism is essential for a viable human future, for the evolution of social as well as ‘natural’ systems [12,11,14,38,39,40,43,44,51,54,62]. Indeed, the term ‘evolutionary pluralism’ refers to a multi-leveled, multi-perspectival approach to the study of evolution that is light years
away of from Victorian evolutionism, whose triumphal Panglossian progressionism is replaced by a more modest—yet more creative—bricolage, or evolutionary ‘tinkering’ [12,14]. But pluralism does not present easy answers. It brings us face to face with complexity, with the unknown, the uncertain, the ‘Other’—and it challenges human beings to think, feel, and act differently.

Discussing the role of pluralism and uncertainty in Europe after 1492, Kane [36] writes that pluralism means recognizing the possibility that there are many correct senses of right and wrong, and also that there may in fact be no absolute right and wrong. Pluralism, he goes on, does not necessarily mean that there might not be absolute values. But this is of little comfort. The uncertainty created by pluralism means that it is not at all clear how to assess different claims and resolve the disagreements between conflicting points of view, or how one should live one’s life while figuring it all out.

It has been argued that the anxiety and uncertainty created by pluralism can lead to three fundamentally different kinds of responses: a return to absolutism, a fall into nihilistic relativism, and an embrace of uncertainty and complexity in the opportunity for, and the responsibility of, social creativity and the creation of alternative futures [40,9]. I shall concern myself here with the anatomy of the dangers of absolutism—the totalizing quest for certainty as manifested in what I am calling the totalitarian mindset—and the possibility of a creative alternative. It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore the complex interrelationship between nihilism and absolutism, particularly in the context of Western consumer cultures.

Individuals all over the world have sought relief from the uncertainty of a pluralistic world in the arms of absolute belief systems of a religious fundamentalist and/or political/nationalistic nature. In this paper I want to focus on the totalitarian mindset as an approach to addressing pluralism and uncertainty. This mindset manifests in a specific way of thinking and discourse, focusing on the elimination of ambiguity, complexity, and difference. It is fundamentally anti-pluralist and totalitarian. Pluralism is viewed as a source of complexity, ambiguity, and uncertainty. Totalitarianism is, in this sense, a form of anti-pluralistic monism, with all power and authority vested in one place, and with one, clearly defined goal. I will conclude by suggesting some alternatives to this apparently perennially popular condition.

3. The elimination of pluralism and uncertainty

A government or group seeking compliance and the elimination of dissent from the population can create conditions that affect the nature of the society’s discourse, and the psychology of the individual citizens. Conditions can be created whereby any form of dissent from the established government view is considered unpatriotic, no alternative perspectives are accepted, let alone encouraged, and discourse and collective thinking processes become simple, black-and-white processes of conformity.

Conditions in the Soviet Union, Mao’s China, Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, Hitler’s Germany and Mussolini’s Italy were clearly designed to enforce a certain mindset through active political and psychological propaganda backed by institutional terror. And in fact Hitler and Mussolini were very familiar with LeBon’s work on the psychology of crowds,
and drew from it extensively, to the point that it has been argued that practically all Nazi propaganda was based on LeBon’s principles [53]. But we need not only look at governments with reputations for totalitarianism in order to see the totalitarian mindset in action. Discussing the post September 11 climate, the following excerpt from an article in the *Manchester Guardian*, cited in Sardar and Davies [64] provides a useful example of how a totalitarian mindset can be created where alternatives are silenced and pluralism is rejected out of hand:

Anyone, it seemed, who had ever been publicly critical of America or globalization suddenly found themselves accused of complicity with Osama bin Laden—and worse. In the British press alone, they have been described as ‘defeatist’ and ‘unpatriotic’, nihilist and masochistic’, and both ‘Stalinist’ and ‘fascist’; as ‘Baader Meinhof gang’ ‘the handmaidens of Osama’ and ‘auxiliary to dictators’; as ‘limp’, ‘wobbly’, ‘heartless and stupid’; and ‘worm eaten by Soviet propaganda’; as ‘full of loose talk’, ‘wilful self-delusion’ and ‘intellectual decadence’; as a collection of ‘useful idiots’, ‘dead-eyed zombies’; and ‘people who hate people’ (p. 36).

In situations that are perceived as emergencies, and particularly ones that are perceived as life-threatening, there is a tendency in social systems to drastically reduce ambiguity and complexity and fall back on a form of very simplistic, black-and-white, totalitarian thinking. This process applies to the entire political spectrum [56]. This kind of thinking has characteristics very similar to those found in research on the authoritarian personality, as outlined by Adorno and colleagues, and subsequent research [1–3,8,22–27,29,32,33,57,56,59,60,64,65,66,70,69].

The situation discussed in this example was obviously the result of an extremely dramatic and horrific set of events. Such totalitarian responses are by no means always simply the result of government propaganda, manipulation, or other forms of intervention. Along with a top-down manipulation of public opinion through propaganda, there can also a bottom-up response that embodies totalitarian thinking and discourse, and demands a totalitarian response from leadership. A totalitarian response may self-organize by tapping into a population’s fears and anxieties, which spark a perceived need for clear, decisive, unambiguous and simple solutions as a form of anxiety alleviation and complexity reduction. The great emotional arousal needs release and finds it in any perceived opposition. As we shall see the totalitarian response is marked by the creation of an out-group, an either-or, black-and-white logic, and a hierarchization that is expressed through subservience to leaders and punitiveness towards those viewed as ‘other’. Such a spontaneous process can simultaneously be supported and enhanced by authority figures using the same kind of unambiguous response, further modeling totalitarian thinking and discourse.

The totalitarian mindset should not be assessed purely by its content and purpose, but also by the way it creates a paradigm or organizing framework for thought and discourse that is effective regardless of the actual nature of the content. While in recent years there has been an increasing drive towards media literacy regarding issues such as race and gender, there is a real need for a deeper understanding of the workings of the totalitarian mindset. Beyond a focus on understanding the veracity and meaning of messages and their ideological positioning or content [15], it is important to understand the underlying
structure of reasoning of thinking and discourse, which structures and organizes the framework for thinking about, and discussing the issue at hand, and the conditions that are likely to precipitate such a mindset—conditions which can, and have been, manipulated and engineered by governments and groups seeking to control public opinion.

4. The conditions and characteristics of anti-pluralism

4.1. Three levels: physical, affective, cognitive

In his review of brainwashing and mind control techniques, Wilson [69] points out that most approaches work at three key levels: the physical, the affective and the cognitive. Whereas brainwashing an individual involves making their physical safety completely dependent on the brainwasher, through the creation of physical dependency for food and water, or through direct physical threats or torture, beatings, etc. in social settings this is somewhat harder to achieve. It is not always possible to directly impact the physical level, but a real or perceived physical threat is typically extremely effective. An attack by a foreign power like Pearl Harbor or the attack on the Twin Towers, a nuclear meltdown, such as the one at Chernobyl which led to the shutting down of Italy’s nuclear energy program (despite the fact that the threat was not immediate it was clearly physical in nature), or, as in Germany after Versailles, the threat of extreme economic hardship and resentment after Versailles—can align public opinion by being the key to the arousal of strong emotion. Affectively there is the combination of fear, anger, and outrage induced by the perception of an attack that creates in the individual and the society an emergency. Emotional arousal is key, and this can be achieved successfully if there is in fact the perception of a tangible threat. Fear-arousing appeals may simply be ignored without tangible and dramatic evidence, as environmentalists know all too well, but the presence of one dramatic example of the threat—physical evidence, in other words—makes a considerable difference in terms of whether the appeals will be taken seriously or simply ignored. Cognitively, this kind of emergency can lead to a complexity-reduction through drastic simplification. This works particularly well in complex situations where there are a number of interrelated factors at work, and it is not easy to untangle all the varied ramifications of the process at work. The population is emotionally aroused and dealing with a lot of complexity, and is eager to reduce that complexity and have clear, unambiguous interpretations of the situation that suggest simple course of action.

4.2. The immediacy of threat and fear and the compression of mental space and time

With an external threat, the level of emotionality and anxiety rises. In such situations one might say that time and space are drastically compressed. In emergency situations, or situations that are framed as such, there is a tendency to suggest there is no time to lose: decisions and actions have to be taken immediately. A situation of great anxiety can be created, where, despite the fact that the actual threat may not be imminent, it appears as if there simply is no time for deliberation, only action [16]. There is no time to debate whether the enemy is an actual enemy, or whether there are alternative modes of resolution because by the time the discussion occurs, the enemy may be at the door and it is actually
the discussion that has ultimately lead to defeat. Note again that in this ‘emergency logic’
of immediate either/or, discussion about frames for understanding the situation—in fact,
any form of discussion—is viewed as playing into the hands of the enemy. A drastic
complexity-reduction takes place, and for this reason it is important to keep the perception
of emergency and emotional arousal high.

4.3. Response to pluralism and ambiguity: susceptibility to situational pressures

Kane and others have suggested that pluralism is the source of complexity, uncertainty,
and ambiguity. Block and Block, [10] discussing the reaction of authoritarian individuals
to ambiguous, unstructured, and new situations describe the following sequence of events:
Ambiguous situation → uneasiness or anxiety reflected as intolerance of ambiguity → need
to structure → structuring → an established frame of reference. As Block and Block state,
“the rapidity with which an ambiguous situation is structured represents an operational
manifestation of intolerance of ambiguity” (p. 304). Persons who are intolerant of
ambiguity impose pre-existing frames of reference on situations, and are not open to new
information.

Barron [6] points out that although it is the combination of organization and complexity
that generates freedom, a system’s organization may ‘operate in such a fashion as to
maintain maladaptive simplicity’ (p.150). He reminds us that in totalitarian social systems,
as in neurotic individuals, suppression is used to achieve unity. Suppression is appealing
because in the short run it seems to work:

Increasing complexity puts a strain upon an organism’s ability to integrate
phenomena; one solution to the difficulty is to inhibit the development of the greater
level of complexity, and thus avoid the temporary disintegration that would
otherwise have resulted. [6]

A consistent attempt to reduce complexity through maladaptive simplicity is
characteristic of the closed-mindedness of the authoritarian personality. It manifests in
the suppression of discourse that reflects a plurality of views, strangled by the fear created
by the perception of anxiety in emergency.

Sampson’s [61] discussion of authoritarianism and intolerance for ambiguity helps to
explain why authoritarian individuals are anti-pluralist. Discussing authoritarian
individuals, he writes,

First, when confronted by an ambiguous situation, one allowing for a variety of
meanings or shades of gray, they feel discomfort. Second, they deal with this
discomfort by seeking a quick and easy solution that minimizes the subtleties that
exist. In short, they make their world into simple black or simple white. From time to
time, all of us show aspects of this intolerance. The mark of the high authoritarian,
however, is the tendency to deal uncharitably with ambiguity most of the time.
(p. 85)

Intolerance for ambiguity manifests in the rejection of the unstructured, and the
complex, and in a desire to be in an environment where rules and expectations have been
clearly set and there are not a plurality of perspectives and possibilities. Uncertain,
ambiguous situations cause stress and anxiety because the authoritarian personality wants a clear set of rules and regulations to be imposed by whoever is in charge. In fact, being in charge means ‘laying down the law’. The stress is on order, almost at all costs, and any deviation on the existing order is seen as a potential plunge into chaos. It is certainly at the cost of novelty and originality. The focus on order and predictability literally prevents anything new, anything surprising, anything different, and anything that disturbs the existing order from appearing. The authoritarian order is therefore a deeply homogeneous order, such as manifested classically in China during the Maoist era, where homogeneity and conformity (most dramatically, albeit superficially, in dress, in ideology, in the reciting of the Little Red book, even in mealtimes and the disappearance of time zones in a country that should have three) were elevated to unassailable virtues. In the authoritarian attitude, there is also a punitive attitude towards those who appear to be going against the rules in some way that may be related to hierarchy, authoritarian submissiveness, and projection.

Sampson then goes on to say of authoritarians that diversity is like ambiguity for them: It provides too many options and alternatives. They show a preference for getting rid of diversity and muting differences. This is the very quality that fits persons who want to keep their own family, neighborhood, community, and nation pure by not allowing various outside groups to gain entry. Second, we all form quick impressions of others, usually based on simple stereotypes we hold about them. Some people, however, allow later knowledge to recast their first impressions. Those who are highly intolerant of ambiguity, by contrast, do not take kindly to new information that does not fit the impression they have already formed. Thus, they may persist in maintaining their first impressions of others and disregard conflicting new information. (p. 89)

Sanford [61] has described authoritarianism as a concept to explain ‘the varying degrees of susceptibility in individuals to situational pressures’ p. 157. Clearly authoritarians find in pluralism a deeply disturbing situational pressures and their response to it is to eliminate it. Key to my argument here is that, under certain kinds of situational pressures, even individuals who may not normally exhibit authoritarian tendencies do so to be able to cope with a world they perceive to be chaotic and dangerous. The situational pressures can lead to a knee-jerk totalitarian response, in terms of the search for an enemy, black-and-white thinking, and the desire for strong leadership. This response from the population in turn creates a great susceptibility to propaganda.

4.4. The authoritarian attitude and the totalitarian mindset

Instead of thinking of the research on authoritarianism exclusively in terms of the deep-seated tendencies of a certain kind of personality with fixed beliefs and attitudes, we might think of a contextually-based authoritarian or anti-pluralist attitude, and I will refer to it here as the totalitarian mindset. The original study of the authoritarian personality was critiqued in much the way that the trait-based personality research of the early part of the last century was. Whilst it was generally agreed that the study described accurately the phenomenology of authoritarianism, it was far less clear whether there was in fact an authoritarian personality ‘type’. Regardless of whether such a type exists, a different way of approaching that research is to see it as outlining features of a general and generic
human attitude that is related to certain contexts, and is a response to certain situational pressures [27,7,30]. Sanford [61], one of the original researchers on the authoritarian personality, pointed out that a person may not, in general, display certain attitudes characteristic of authoritarianism unless a situation of great complexity and/or (perceived) danger elicits substantial anxiety, at which point the generally non-authoritarian individual may resort to the kind of black-and-white thinking, scapegoating, and submission to authority that is characteristic of the authoritarian attitude. In other words, whether or not an authoritarian personality type exists, an authoritarian attitude is a characteristic that most humans can, to some degree or other, share when exposed to certain circumstances. Next, I outline the correlation between external circumstances and attitudinal characteristics that combine to create the context for the totalitarian, anti-pluralist mindset.

5. The totalitarian, anti-pluralist-mindset

We too have the right to preach a mystery, and to teach them that it is not the free judgment of their hearts, not love that matters, but a mystery they must follow blindly even against their conscience. So we have done. We have corrected Thy work and founded it upon miracle, mystery, and authority.

The Grand Inquisitor, In *Brothers Karamazov* by Dostoevsky

5.1. Out-group, scapegoating, and superstition

The perception of an out-group as a threat and an enemy is the glue that holds this mindset together. Positing an out-group as enemy, as Goering suggests, is a key strategy for uniting a people and getting them to set aside internal differences. This strategy also applies to groups, and indeed one can even see it at work in families, where relatives who may be at loggerheads since infancy will suddenly close ranks when one of them is threatened by an outsider. Chomsky [15] among many others, also points to the way this tactic has been part and parcel of politics throughout history, and has indeed been omnipresent in the American political landscape.

An out-group does not have to be outside society. It can be created within an existing society, as was the case with Jews in Germany in the 1930s. Chinese Communists held up the external threat of the USA and the internal threat of counter-revolutionary landowners, merchants, bankers and others. Sargant [65] has argued for the importance of the internal threat. In cases where open conflict is lacking or has been expected for a long time but has not yet materialized, having the internal out-group provides an immediate source of danger. When asked whether he thought Jews should be annihilated, Hitler replied no, because then “we should have to invent him. It is essential to have a tangible enemy, not merely an abstract one.” A member of a Japanese mission to Berlin in 1932 is said to have remarked that the National Socialist movement was “magnificent. I wish we could have something like it in Japan, only we can’t, because we haven’t got any Jews.” (Cited in Hoffer, [32; 91])

Sanford’s [61] enumeration of the characteristics of the authoritarian personality includes ‘superstition’. Superstition indicates a tendency to shift responsibility from within the individual onto outside forces beyond his control; these forces appear to the individual as mystical or fantastic determinants of his fate. (p. 145)
The qualities of the out-group typically do have something of the supernatural about them—Jews who control the German economy and indeed the world economy, for instance—because everything must be blamed on them. ‘Racial’, cultural, and other differences are emphasized to exaggerate the ‘otherness’ of the out-group. They are not like us, and in fact are quite the opposite of who we are. In their otherness they become the recipients of projection, and of peculiar mystery. Images of dirt, pollution, vermin, of a virus, are often used to emphasize not only the difference but the association of the other with all that is sick, unpleasant, and rejected by ‘us’.

The out-group makes scapegoating possible, since everything that goes wrong can be blamed on them, and therefore distracts attention from one’s own complicity in the state of affairs. Scapegoating allows for a massive reduction of complexity, and eliminates the need to look at the whole, at interdependencies, at the way complex issues have many determining factors (which is precisely what makes them so difficult to address), at one’s own participation and complicity in the present state of affairs, and focuses all attention unambiguously on the out-group. The creation of an out-group to scapegoat is essentially a giant cop-out that allows governments to redirect attention from internal conditions to external foes, and allows citizens to avoid having to deal with the complexity of life, with all too complex economic, social, and political woes.

5.2. Either/or logic, black-and-white thinking

The people in their overwhelming majority are so feminine in their nature and attitude that sober reasoning determined their thoughts and actions far less than emotion and feeling. And this sentiment is not complicated, but very simple and all of a piece. It does not have multiple shadings; it has a positive and a negative; love or hate, right or wrong, truth or lie, never half this way and half that way, never partially, or that kind of thing. (Hitler [31; 183])

Once the out-group enemy has been located, an inexorable logic of either/or follows. Either you are for us, or you are against us. If you are against us, you are betraying your country. This creates a powerful cocktail of a simple choice, anchored by a deep emotional resonance and framed with an either/or logic that leaves no alternatives. It is interesting to see that the ‘us’ in this case is typically the leadership of the ‘in-group’ with which the population is asked to/wants to identify. In other words, it is the leadership policies one is either for or against, and the leaders are the ones that get to define the parameters of what constitutes being ‘for’ or ‘against’. More compellingly, it is now also up to the leaders of the in-group to define what is real and true what is not, what is, from their perspective, factual information and ‘enemy propaganda’.

This kind of either/or, black-and-white logic is a classic characteristic found in the authoritarian personality, and is technically known as ‘stereotypy’.

Stereotypy is the tendency to think in rigid, oversimplified categories, in unambiguous terms of black and white, particularly in the realm of psychological or social matters. We hypothesized that some people, even those who are otherwise ‘intelligent’, may resort to primitive explanations of human events at least partly because they cannot allow many
of the ideas and observations needed for an adequate account to enter into their calculations; because these ideas are affect-laden and potentially anxiety-producing, they cannot be included in the conscious scheme of things [61; 145].

As Sanford points out, even intelligent people can resort to black and white thinking when they are overwhelmed and look for ways to drastically reduce complexity. At a certain threshold of complexity and anxiety, many people succumb to the simplicity of the totalitarian mindset. Either A or B. It is possible to relinquish responsibility, follow the leader, and direct the anxiety turned to anger onto an external group. Eliminate all variables, except one that can be easily measured. “You’re either for me or against me,” (which translates into, “my way or the highway.”).

This kind of thinking is successful at pseudo-simplification: it creates the illusion of clarity, decisiveness, and power. Either/or, black-and-white, dichotomous thinking appears to cut through ambiguity. Such polarizing thinking does not allow for creativity and complexity, and the exploration of alternative approaches. But one has to remember that it is precisely the anxiety caused by a plurality of approaches, and the time taken to explore them, that the anti-pluralist, totalitarian attitude seeks to eliminate. “The situation is clear: X is to blame (Jews, Osama bin Laden, American capitalism, etc.).” Black-and-white thinking is a key way of maintaining cognitive authoritarianism in the discourse of a system large or small.

5.3. Authoritarian submission/hierarchy

At times of great anxiety, the fear of imminent threat also elicits a demand for a savior who will point out exactly what needs to be done, why, by whom, and to whom (a committee does not quite do the trick and is far less reassuring). A dramatic feature of the authoritarian attitude is the submission to authority and the domination of those perceived to be lower on the hierarchy. The authoritarian attitude is very concerned with hierarchical power structures, and in fact sees the world in terms of a rigid hierarchy from strong down to weak. It involves submissiveness to those above, a longing for strong leadership, and a willingness to sacrifice much for the group, the organization, or the nation. Authoritarian individuals are paternalistic, patronizing, and punitive to those below them in the hierarchy. The combination of conventionalism, with a focus on hierarchy, sets up a rigid, unchanging framework that cannot be challenged. The notion of heterarchy, or shifting centers of power based on context and competence, is deeply disturbing in an authoritarian system. Not knowing what the fixed ‘chain of command’ is causes great anxiety. A more open, democratic structure seems chaotic and impossible, because it appears there are no rules, no clarity, no order, and there is ‘no respect’.

The case of Adolf Hitler is extremely instructive. Nazi Germany provides us with a textbook example of authoritarian manipulation. Hitler came to power in difficult times, and presented himself as the visionary savior. For leaders who are already in power and whose popularity is severely challenged, a war can be extremely useful. In other words, leaders who lack charisma can be granted charismatic qualities through circumstances. One only needs to look at the sudden popularity of leaders who in peacetime may have been wildly unpopular, as a war begins. Margaret Thatcher’s dismal ratings before and after the Falklands war are a case in point. A peculiar shift occurs as the nation rallies
around the leader who may previously have been despised or simply ridiculed. Through a process that seems almost magical the leader is soon viewed as decisive, powerful, and even wise.

The literature of social psychology provides us ample research into the dynamics of conformity and conversion. Particularly when there is great anxiety, the forces of conformity come into play and an increasing alignment occurs to what is perceived to be the voice of authority. Psycho-dynamically, a process of collective projection occurs, endowing the leader with all the clarity and power individuals seem to lack—and playing into the leader-as-father role. In Germany this was achieved through incredibly effective but low-tech spectacle and propaganda, which was itself influenced by early research on mass psychology. The Nuremberg rallies were remarkable, hypnotic efforts in mass hypnosis and hysteria that created a ritual to forge the common identity of the new Germans, which was represented in the mythical figure of Hitler. Similar dynamics occur in cults with guru-figures as their leaders, and indeed the dynamics are remarkable similar.

Mao also played an unambiguous savior role, and after 1949 rode on the wave of his revolutionary success. Perhaps no greater cult of personality was ever seen, and it is important to note that the attachment to Mao, and indeed the dependence on his leadership, became so great that, as with many cases of guru cult-leaders, many found it hard to believe he had made mistakes—even in such egregious and monstrous cases as the Great Leap Forward, when tens of millions died of famine because of what can only be called gross, ego-driven mismanagement. In years of bumper crops, people-power was diverted to the one single Mao-defined goal of those years, steel production, and consequently not enough food was available. The provincial propaganda held that there had been crop-failures in every other province...

5.4. Unification/anti-intropection

Through the definition of an out-group, an in-group is created. The ‘us,’ the ‘we’, is defined in opposition to ‘them’. The complexity of identity, particularly in societies with many different ethnic and religious groups, is reduced to a generic ‘us’ by virtue of the threat. Suddenly ‘we are all in this together’, for ‘survival’. Intra-societal differences are reduced to the status of squabbles and quickly set aside when a common threat is perceived (Sherif, 1988).

A simple identity overcomes differences: it is simple because the key uniting factor is the external enemy, and the perception is that identity forged by external threat demands a clear hierarchy and well-defined leadership. At the same time, the focus is almost entirely external. There is little or no real attention placed on what goes on inside the system, and this reflects an authoritarian attitude called anti-intropection. Anti-intropection means being unwilling to look inside, not approaching an issue in a ‘psychological’ way, in the sense that there is no attempt to understand the nature of subjectivity—feelings, thoughts, motivation, or generally look within. As Sanford [61] wrote:

Self-awareness might threaten his whole scheme of adjustment. He would be afraid of genuine feeling because his emotions might get out of control, afraid of thinking about human phenomena because he might think ‘wrong’ thoughts (p. 144).
Authoritarians want things ‘plain and simple’, do not have time for feelings or for ‘idle speculation’. The authoritarian’s world is completely ‘objective’, in the sense that the way they see the world is not their own unique view of the world but THE right way—nothing else is conceivable. Their own ‘subjectivity’, and its particular bias, plays no role in this at all, and therefore in reality deeply colors everything they see and do. The authoritarian attitude is therefore very open to self-deception.

At a social level, the development of this characteristic is important. In the same way that the authoritarian individual does not explore his or her motives and feelings, the creation of a totalitarian mindset and system requires as little ‘collective introspection’ as possible. No questioning of motives, no attention to the hysterical nature of some of the feelings expressed (hatred, love of country/in-group, and so on), only a focus on the positive, idealized symbols of the in-group. Attention is diverted from internal divisions, and critics of government spending can suddenly become wildly supportive when huge unbudgeted sums are spent on war and defense efforts. The ‘patriot bypass’ makes all forms of critical thinking dormant. Atrocities in the name of ‘the good’ become the devastating example of what Jung [35] called ‘enantiodromia’, the extreme polarization whereby actions in the name of ‘the good’ turn into the ‘evil’ they are attempting to destroy.

A related characteristic is ‘pseudo-conservatism’, or the desire to safeguard (conserve) the in-group’s status quo at all costs. The term ‘pseudo-’ points to the tendency to be so extreme and unreflective about preserving the in-group that one is willing to actually destroy what one is trying to save in the process. This manifests, for instance, in democratic countries resorting to the same tactics as anti-democratic nations in order to fight them. It is also manifested in the classic attack on dissenters—“they wouldn’t let you do that in the Soviet Union/Afghanistan/etc.” which ironically attempts to deprive dissenters of the very freedom that makes the country worth fighting for and differentiates it from undemocratic countries.

6. The totalitarian paradigm of certainty and simplicity

The underlying structure of thinking or paradigm of the totalitarian mindset can be summarized in the following way. It reflects, as I have suggested, a particular way of thinking and discourse.

Out-group/scapegoating: This is a drastic form of reductionism, reducing the complexity of the situation to one, easily identifiable variable.

Either/or: A logic of disjunction creates binary opposition that cannot be reconciled or ‘thought together’.

Hierarchy/centralization: The hierarchy of domination and centralization of authority is focused on power, and indeed the multi-dimensionality of the world is reduced to the uni-dimensional, central construct of power.

Unification/identification: In the focus on the out-group what becomes profoundly obscured is the role of the observer in the observation. Self-reflection and self-inquiry can easily lead to uncertainty, ambiguity, and doubt, and this is precisely what the totalitarian mindset rejects, because its focus is on certainty and simplicity.
Underlying these central elements of the totalitarian mindset is a stress on simplicity at the expense of complexity and a quest for certainty. In fact, authoritarianism is correlated with a preference for simplicity over complexity [67].

6.1. The return of the regressed

The era of McCarthyism is remembered as a period of collective consensus trance by many. The United States was swept away by the self-aggrandizing rhetoric of a paranoid senator, and turned the ‘Red Scare’ into a rabid witch-hunt. In 1950, the previously undistinguished McCarthy rose to prominence when he claimed that there were 205 Communists subversives in the State Department. He was unable to present any proof for his statement, but, in an interesting and familiar move, stepped up his rhetoric and started an anti-Communist crusade. It amounted to little more than the persecution and vilification of many Americans. It is important to note that other Government offices at the time actually successfully prosecuted cases against Communists, but McCarthy never made a plausible case against anyone.

McCarthy’s fall occurred during 36 days of televised hearings in 1954. His rabid and increasingly offensive interrogation methods were displayed nationally. McCarthy embarked on a diatribe against a junior defense lawyer on whom he had found some ‘dirt’—participation in a left-leaning student association at age 15—which was embarrassing in its pettiness. A senior liberal lawyer, appalled by his methods, presented a spirited and devastating counter-attack, and the faces of those present showed the general degree of embarrassment at the depths to which McCarthy had fallen. The meeting was wisely adjourned at that point, but a camera was left rolling as a fuming and furious McCarthy responded hysterically while the room quietly emptied, and the entire nation saw the discredited Senator’s last, pathetic stand [55].

As if a hypnotist had snapped his fingers, Americans awoke from the nightmare of McCarthyism on that day. Suddenly the deeply misguided nature of the mixture of fear, patriotism, and witch-hunts McCarthy served up became crystal clear. Will we all be able to learn from the lessons of those years, and that day, 50 years ago, and insist on a creative response to the consensus trance of the totalitarian mindset? In 2003 a polemical book of McCarthy revisionism, accusing all US liberals of treason, is a New York Times bestseller [17].

7. The paradigm of complexity: creative attitude, creative discourse

7.1. Complexity, pluralism and the future

In this essay I have presented the notion of a totalitarian, anti-pluralist attitude. I have illustrated some of the core characteristics of the totalitarian attitude, and argued that it is simply not clear that human beings are prepared to live in an increasingly complex and pluralistic world. The urgency of an education that prepares human beings for pluralism and complexity becomes clear.

The surprising eagerness with which totalitarianism has historically been embraced in the democratic countries of the West [11,63] suggests that it is a complex phenomenon
requiring much more research. I have shown it is possible to outline in broad strokes the factors behind totalitarian responses. The complexity of pluralism can all too easily lead to a desire for simplification and anxiety reduction. This manifests as reductive, black and white solutions that present themselves as unambiguous, forceful, and lucid, guided by overarching values that allow one to ‘take a stand’ in the face of ‘enemies’ internal and external. The simplistic, black and white future lies at the heart of both McWorld and the Global Jihad. Both of Barber’s options cannot accept the existence of a pluralistic world in which people with different beliefs, behaviors, traditions, worldviews co-exist. Both are totalitarian inasmuch as they are driven by the single-minded pursuit of one or two selected goals—whether economic or military conquest, and in the case of the corporate fascism of the McWorld scenario, both apply. Everything that moves towards the goal(s) is supported, what does not support them is rejected and indeed eliminated. A complex world is reduced to stark simplicity with an either/or logic. Either you are for us, or you are against us.

In the McWorld scenario, the totalitarian element would manifest most clearly in the necessity for perpetual war and perpetual threat, in order to raise the anxiety and fear of the population. The stress on the presence of an external enemy would paint any attempt at presenting alternatives at best as playing into the hands of the enemy, or simply as treason. The encroachment on basic civil liberties would be forced, and eventually accepted, in the name of ‘national security’, and indeed patriotism. Support of the activities against the enemy would be considered not simply a badge of honor, but a basic prerequisite of citizenship. During periods of economic health, this would lead to a condition where silence around some political issues—typically foreign policy issues—would be considered an acceptable sacrifice, with the proviso that economic prosperity should continue. Given the dismal understanding of foreign policy and international affairs in many countries, and particularly in the US, where the interest in foreign affairs, is minimal anyway, this would not be a huge sacrifice. With the onset of economic hardship, the situation would likely become more unstable and more dramatic enforcement and allegiance would have to be won as the population might begin to question the legitimacy of the government’s activities and their resource allocation.

An alternative to these bleak scenarios requires an education in pluralism, complexity, and creativity.

1. Education for Pluralism—a recognition of difference and the possibility for creativity and unity in diversity rather than unity at the expense of diversity or vice versa [12,62].
2. Education for Complexity—the capacity to go beyond reductive thought and black and white logic towards what Morin has called “complex thought [52];”
3. Education in Media Literacy and the psychology of mass manipulation and self-deception, to create a vigilance regarding the possibility of totalitarian mindset [63];
4. Education that should include the relationship between reason and emotion, anxiety, and the human capacity for self-deception [29]. This suggests the need for an education that is not just cognitive but addresses the whole person [50].
5. Education that includes a new emphasis on creating the conditions for co-existence, for mutual understanding, and for viewing pluralism as an opportunity for creativity [42, 21, 43].

6. Education for creativity—for the capacity to go beyond what is and integrate new perspectives, new solutions, the capacity to create new futures. Developing the capacity to approach pluralism as an opportunity for creativity [7].

7.2. Pluralism

My stress on education for pluralism—understood not as schooling, but as a process of lifelong learning—emerges out of the previously cited evidence that pluralism is still an extremely problematic phenomenon, particularly cultural and political pluralism [13]. Both cognitively and affectively, pluralism and difference are more often than not considered disturbing, and the disequilibrium caused by this disturbance is seen as something to be reduced or eliminated. Worldwide, schooling is still largely ethnocentric. Research into genetics, language, evolution, cultural history, migration, and other areas has shown the incredible intertwining and interweaving of human beings over thousands of years [12]. And yet myths of cultural, ‘racial’, religious, and genetic purity are perpetuated by socialization and education, and contribute to extremely dangerous ideologies of superiority, inferiority, and profound intolerance [14]. Our planetary understanding of pluralism and diversity are still deeply flawed, and must be explored, engaged, and dialogued about if we are to create pluralistic futures.

7.3. Complex thought

Morin [52] has argued that the problem facing present Western educational system is not a lack of available information, but a fundamentally problematic way of organizing knowledge. Morin argues that in the West, the organization of knowledge is based on certain underlying principles he calls ‘simple thought’. Simple thought is reductive, disjunctive and uni-dimensional. Such thought is incapable of articulating and understanding the complexity of pluralism. Morin’s magnum opus, the five volume Method [45–51], has consisted of the development of ‘complex thought’. Complex thought offers the possibility for an alternative to the totalitarian attitude: its organizing principles are dialogical, complex (in the sense of focusing on both part and whole, rather than one or the other, as in reductionism or holism), and multidimensional.

Morin’s articulation of a paradigm of complexity avoids reductionism, whether reduction to the part, as in atomism, or to the whole, as in holism, and stresses unity in diversity and the interrelationship between part and whole. It avoids disjunction in favor of distinction and dialogical relations: rather than the separation of disjunction it distinguishes, without destroying the connection that makes a dialogical relationship (both/and) possible. The stress is also on multi- as opposed to uni-dimensionality, recognizing, for instance, the plurality of human manifestations, for instance, as homo
faber, homo ludens, homo economicus, etc. or the capacity for both independence of judgment and conformity. Finally, the re-integration of the observer into the observed forces us to take a long hard look at the role we play in creating our own universe of meaning, and the possibility of error and self-deception. Complexity, disorder and uncertainty are not viewed as elements to be eliminated at all costs, but rather as inherent in our knowledge of the world, and the very source of change and transformation that can potentially keep an individual or a social system open and alive. Crucially for an understanding of pluralism, Morin stresses the notion of unitas multiplex, of unity in diversity. Unitas multiplex does not privilege unity over diversity or diversity over unity, but recognizes that the two can be dialogically linked in a way that is mutually beneficial.

7.4. Creativity

Creativity is often thought of as a phenomenon confined to the arts, or at best the arts and sciences. Studying the research on authoritarianism and creativity, it is clear that the characteristics of the authoritarian attitude are in fact the mirror image of those of the creative person. If intolerance of ambiguity is central to the anti-pluralist attitude, we find that tolerance of ambiguity is central to the creative attitude [40,6,18].

Tolerance for ambiguity is a central characteristic of the creative attitude. Creative persons are intrigued, stimulated, and motivated to explore the unfamiliar and unstructured, by situations and things for which there is no one, clear solution or approach. It is the opposite of a fear of the unstructured and unfamiliar. It means enjoying and being attracted enjoy situations for which there are no clear rules, no established roadmaps. Ambiguity destabilizes the mental equilibrium. It forces inquiry, exploration, and the creation of new ways of dealing with a situation. An unwillingness to allow or accept ambiguity means the person confronted with ambiguity will immediately attempt to impose a pre-existing framework or set of rules on the situation, and not remain open to the situation long enough to create a situation-specific way of dealing with it. Tolerance for ambiguity involves wanting to create one’s own rules and roadmaps, and not immediately applying pre-existing ones. It means remaining open to possibilities, potentials, novelty, change, and difference.

Openness to experience, independence of judgment, a willingness to challenge assumptions, the exploration of possibilities, the refusal of premature closure, and paradoxical (as opposed to dichotomous, black-and-white) thinking, these are some of the characteristics of the creative person which, as Barron [6,7] went to great lengths to point out, should be seen as qualities that can be cultivated rather than fixed, innate traits that one either has or has not.

Already in 1941 Erich Fromm [25] discussed the inherent ambiguity in freedom, in the sense that freedom means precisely that there is no unambiguous way one should think/feel/act, and the human impulse to escape from this freedom. Barron [6] has written eloquently about the relationship between creativity and freedom precisely because a broader view of creativity, as a creative attitude, rather than as a gift confined to the arts and sciences, pertains to the creation of meaning and the possibility to create to be free. For Barron, being able to create meant being able to choose between habit, and the existing
order, and difference, innovation and change. Freedom means the ability to create a *plurality* of choices for oneself and for others. Whatever one chooses to do, creativity gives us the choice because it is the capacity to articulate and express our freedom, to explore alternatives. The tolerance for ambiguity creative individuals show lies precisely in the ability to suspend the need for pre-established ways of doing things and attempt to make sense of the situation themselves.

If the totalitarian mindset seeks simplicity through the elimination of complexity and uncertainty, an alternative does present itself, one that thrives on complexity and creativity. Research on creative individuals, and by extension what I am calling the creative attitude [27], shows that the characteristics of the creative individual are the mirror image of those of the authoritarian person/totalitarian attitude. They include:

- Tolerance for Ambiguity [7,18,34]
- Openness to Experience [27]
- Preference for Complexity [6,7]
- Paradoxical or “Janusian” (both/and) thinking [58]
- Challenging of Assumptions [6]

The valorization and cultivation of these characteristics, and of a creative attitude, can serve as a safeguard against the totalitarian mindset, and assist us in developing an attitude that recognizes pluralism as an essential characteristic of non-totalitarian futures. Again, rather than seeing these as the fixed personality traits of creative geniuses, we can see them as components of a creative attitude, and a heuristic device to remind us to avoid self-deception and consensus trance by making a choice to, for instance, challenge assumption, remain open, tolerate ambiguity, not recoil from complexity, explore possibilities beyond black-and-white options, and so on.

### 7.5. Media literacy

The term media literacy has been used increasingly to refer to a process of education about the way the media can inform attitudes towards issues of race and gender. A pluralistic society must include a greater understanding of the nature of political and media manipulation of opinion, and of the human capacity for self-deception, and the willingness to ‘escape from freedom’. I have tried to outline some of the basic factors in the creation of anti-pluralist conditions and the totalitarian mindset.

Pluralism requires the ability to respond creatively to the challenge of complexity, not only through reduction (which may at times be necessary) but also through ongoing creation of new frameworks for making sense of the world and incorporating the new, rather than falling back on pre-existing ways of knowing [42]. Understanding the way that the media shape our present and our understanding of possible futures, and also understanding how the proliferation of media resources can be navigated to obtain a number of different perspectives on an issue, are becoming key competencies in a ‘media-ted’ world.
7.6. Creative dialogue

Pluralism also requires a form of dialogue and exchange that does more than immediately totalize and dichotomize, but rather is open to the dialogue of ambiguity and openness to other perspectives without seeking immediate closure and the suppression of the voices of pluralism. The anti-pluralist approach to discourse is to eliminate the other’s position, and if necessary, the very possibility of alternatives. The black-and-white, ‘simple’ logic of anti-pluralism is at the heart of what Tannen [68] calls the *culture of argument*.

In his research on the debate about the Vietnam war, Garrett [28] pointed out the following ‘conceptual obstacles’ that arose as two sides confronted each other on the issue. They are (a) the either/or syndrome, the simple logic of black and white; (b) disguising the first principles, or not making one’s own assumptions and underlying beliefs transparent; (c) not seeing the other’s principles, or not attempting to understand those of the other side; (d) partial approaches, with the focus on only a small aspect of the debate which comes to represent the whole (*pars pro toto*), or apples and oranges, where the sides are debating about what are in fact different issues. Garrett’s important research clearly demonstrates the characteristics of what I have been calling an anti-pluralist discourse.

We must remember that in the emergency situation created by the totalitarian mindset, conflict is always made to look as if it always appears in the image of extremity, whereas, in fact, it is actually the lack of recognition of the need for conflict and provision for appropriate forms for it that leads to danger. This ultimate destructive form is frightening, but it also is not conflict. It is almost the reverse; it is the end result of the attempt to avoid and suppress conflict [4; 130].

In this way, civic discourse loses all creativity, all exploration and consideration of possibilities all respect for pluralism and the expression of different voices that can contribute to the development of alternative futures. It is this aspect of the totalitarian mindset that needs to be challenged, the identification with one position, one perspective, one view of the world at the exclusion of others that is actually concerned largely with shutting down other voices. This deeply anti-democratic, anti-freedom, ‘pseudo-conservative’ perspective must be challenged if we are to retain pluralism in our discourse, and cherish the value of the very democracy and pluralism we are trying to preserve. Democracy is based on the respect for difference. Pluralism is a cornerstone of democracy. And yet there is little or no effort made to explore and educate for better, more creative ways for these inevitable, surely desired, differences to coexist and communicate in mutually beneficial ways. In a pluralistic society, increasing emphasis must be paid on the development of basic skills in conflict resolution, dialogue, and communication [68, 19–21, 41].

7.7. Conclusion

In this essay I have outlined the characteristics of what I have called the totalitarian mindset. Under certain circumstances, human beings engage in patterns of thinking and behavior that are extremely closed and intolerant of difference and pluralism.
These patterns lead us towards the creation of totalitarian futures. An awareness of how these patterns arise, how they can be generated and manipulated through the use of fear, and how totalitarianism plays into the desire in human beings for ‘absolute’ answers and solutions, can be used to increase awareness and prevention of attempts at manipulation, and from the dangers of actively wanting to succumb to totalitarian solutions in times of stress and anxiety.

I have also suggested a broader educational agenda for a pluralistic future, based on the assumption that the lived experience of pluralism is still largely unfamiliar and anxiety inducing. Pluralism is generally not understood, with many myths of purity and racial or cultural superiority still prevalent. Finally, as part of that agenda for education, I have stressed the importance of creativity as an adaptive capacity, as an attitude that allows individuals and groups to see pluralism as an opportunity for growth and positive change rather than simply for conflict.

References


